

Last week, I laid out the four basic elements of early Christian worship that are mentioned in Acts 2:42 and you'll see that our service is arranged around these four foundations: the teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers. Today I want you to notice what is missing from this list. For instance, nowhere in the New Testament does it say that you have to have ordained clergy to worship God. Nowhere does it mention trained musicians or a choir. Dedicated church buildings aren't on the list. Neither are pews or hymnbooks. And, of course, we find no evidence of even the most rudimentary sound system, let alone flashy new TV screens.

We may decide that these things are necessary for us but we have to remember that they are not necessary for God and isn't worship all about God? So before we think about what worship could be or should be for us or for anyone else, we'd better think about what worship could be and should be for

God. Every preacher, singer, instrument player, or scripture reader has to keep this crucial fact in mind: when we worship, you folks in the pews are the ones who are worshipping, not just those of us who stand on the stage. You are not our audience; God is your audience.

I don't remember learning that in my family growing up. Worship was pretty much about the sermon and the choir. When we moved to a new city, that's what we looked for: a preacher who preached good sermons and a choir that sang good music. But I can speak from experience that worship isn't about the sermon. In fact, I seem to get the most compliments on my most mediocre sermons, which tells me that on that particular Sunday I really wasn't saying anything and that's why you could hear what God was saying. I got out of the way so that God could get a word in edgewise.

But week-by-week, as I pour out heart and soul into a sermon, it's easy for me to forget that, which is why I have to

keep going back to the heart of worship because that's where God is. Even if we forget it on most days, we cannot deny that God is the why of our worship.

Now that raises an interesting theological question: does that mean that God needs to be worshiped? When you think about it, kings and pop stars need to be worshiped, because they can't be kings or pop stars unless a lot of people bow down and worship them. But it's not the same with God. God is God, with us or without us. God doesn't have a fragile ego and doesn't need constant affirmation as kings and pop stars and so many of us do.

We worship God not because God is needy for our worship but because God is worthy of our worship. That's what we hear in the Book of Revelation, when John has his grand vision of the saints worshiping around the throne of God. Throughout the Book, God is busy destroying all the powers of sin and death in the world and so the multitude cries out: "Salvation

belongs to our God...and to the Lamb." And then the angels chime in with: "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Reading about all of God's works and wonders in the Bible, you would think that it is obvious that our God is worthy to be worshiped, but sadly it is not. In fact, few of us know how worthy our God really is until we learn how worthless everything else is. Perhaps that's why worship doesn't do much for us when we're young or when we are first starting out. When we strike out on our own, we are looking for stuff, trying to accumulate the things and the people that will make us feel sexy and successful and secure and satisfied. The truth is that we haven't lived long enough to be disappointed and disillusioned by all those things. But then we get the degree. We get the career. We get the marriage, the house, the kids and the vacations. And one morning we wake up and ask

ourselves, "Is this it?" "Is this all there is?"

The problem that we have when we begin our life journey is that most of us haven't sinned enough to have suffered enough to have been saved enough to want to—to have to—give God blessing and glory and thanksgiving and honor and all the rest. But if we're not ready yet, we just have to wait a few years. The longer we live, the more likely we are to go through both hell and high water and discover the hard way that it is God alone who brings us back again.

In John's vision, one of the elders asks him, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" And then he answers his own question: "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal." In John, that means those who have been faithful and have come through the Last Judgment, but I take it to be a metaphor for everything we go through up to and including the Judgment. For most of us, life is one long ordeal, and by the time we get through it, we know whom to

thank for it. We don't just need to worship; we can't help it. There is no other way to express what we feel or to share what we know.

We can't see a multitude of angels or the communion of saints robed in white falling down to bless God here on your average Sunday, but we do get just a short clip of that worship service when we sing the doxology. We weren't singing it in the traditional service when I arrived here in 2011. I suppose it got taken out of the worship service back when the church growth gurus were saying that the ritual was too stilted and the music was too stuffy. But I wasn't here long before I quietly slipped it back in.

For one thing, I think it is important to offer up our praise and not just our money. Singing the doxology is a weekly reminder of why we give in the first place. But it has a more personal meaning for me, too. I was in Eugene in June of 1993. It was my first Sunday back in church following brain surgery. I

was still on leave, so I was just sitting in the pews, singing the hymns, listening to the sermon, and doing what you always get to do and I almost never get to do. The offering plate went by as the choir sang an anthem. When the organist started into the doxology, I stood up and with those first words, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow..." my knees almost buckled. My throat swelled shut. My eyes filled with tears and this pastor who almost never cries began to sob. I didn't need a good sermon that day. I didn't need the best music. I didn't need a sophisticated sound system or a TV screen. I just needed the chance to praise God from whom the blessings of healing were flowing for me.

But the point is, it's not about me. It's about God and all the incredible things that God is doing in and with and through our lives. Maybe the healing isn't flowing for you or pain is a great ordeal for you. It certainly is for many in our world today. We are still in the thick of the battle, the game is still grinding

on, and it's scary to think what we will have to lose before we win.

In times like these those who have lived long and hard enough will tell us that God is all we really need. We have a deep, deep hunger in our heart and there is nothing on this earth but God who can take that longing away. It's too bad that so many of us have to go through so many losses—marriages, family members, our health, our wealth—before we learn that. I wonder how many marriages could have made it if husband and wife weren't expecting their partner to fill the hole in their soul? God is the only lover who can ever do that.

That is why God is the why of our worship. Psalm 63 puts it best and it is my prayer that worship may once in a while help us to live into these words:

O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
    my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
    as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.  
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,

beholding your power and glory.  
Because your steadfast love is better than life,  
my lips will praise you.  
So I will bless you as long as I live;  
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

#### Gathering Prayer

Holy God, all we can do is name what you are not. You are not mortal. You are not visible. You are not describable, containable, or controllable. You are not measurable in any way. But you are knowable. Thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus, who makes your love so believable. And we thank for this community of faith that gathers to worship you and to make your love actual. In this next hour, we pray that you will take away whatever is not real, whatever is superficial, that your Spirit will sweep away all the distractions and our nagging inner conversations. May the grace of your presence still our minds, break open our hearts, and tune our spirits to worship you. All we really want and need is you. With Jesus, we pray. Amen.