

WGUMC July 3, 2016 "The Who of Worship"  
Luke 13:10-17

One Sunday morning, the pastor noticed little Johnny was staring up at the large plaque that hung in the foyer of the church. The seven-year-old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the pastor walked up, stood beside the boy, and said quietly, "Good morning son." "Good morning, pastor" replied the young man, still focused on the plaque.

"Sir, what is this?" Johnny asked.

"Well son, these are all the people who have died in the service," replied the pastor. Soberly, they stood together, staring at the large plaque.

Little Johnny's voice barely broke the silence when he asked quietly, "Which one sir, the 8:45 or the 11:00 service?"

It's an oldie, but a goodie for this July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend. It reminds us that while we can die of our wounds on a battlefield, we can also die of boredom in the church. Church can be deadly for many of us. It's a wonder that people keep coming.

Truthfully, in more and more churches, fewer and fewer are coming these days. Since the beginning of this century, worship attendance has been declining across the nation and across denominations. Forty percent of Americans claim to be

in worship on any given Sunday, but if you count heads in worship, you'll find that the real number is less than half that. Apparently, about 20% of Americans meant to go to church but never actually got there.

The reasons are legion: kids' sports and work demands, household chores and travel plans, and a dire need for sleep at the end of a too-busy week. On top of that our culture is getting more secular, religious institutions are getting a lot less popular and so worship is getting crowded out of our weekly calendar.

When you think about it, coming together for worship is a counter-cultural activity. For one thing, worship calls us to be self-less in a very selfish world. Worship calls us to be quiet in a noisy world. Worship brings the generations together in an age-segregated world. Worship isn't all that exciting in an entertainment-driven world. Here we tell the same old story every week in a novelty-obsessed world.

So churches are really going against the grain and we see it on Sunday morning, not only in small churches or mainline churches, but in many of the big, conservative churches as well. Oh, there are more mega-churches than ever, but their attenders are less regular. In fact, one of the reasons that people are drawn to mega-churches is that you don't have to make a mega-commitment to go to one. It's easy to skip worship in a mega-church; no one notices you aren't there. And if current trends continue, some data crunchers are predicting that by mid-century churches in the United States will look a lot like churches in Western Europe: mostly empty.

As you can imagine, there has been talk among church leaders in the past couple of decades about how to gin up worship (poor choice of words for a Methodist!), how to make it more alive and more attractive to Gen-X'ers and Millennials. But maybe all this focus on numbers is not what is needed.

I'm beginning to see that our job is not to get more people into worship, as if that were some sure sign of success. Worship attendance is no proof of holiness. Just sitting in a pew or standing in a pulpit doesn't count as following Jesus. Our job is to do what Jesus did. He didn't tell people to go to worship. Instead, he went to the people. He met them in their need, and gave them a reason to worship.

A perfect example of this is in our reading from Luke this morning. The story of Jesus healing on the Sabbath may seem to be a strange choice for a sermon series focusing on worship. That's because in this story, Jesus appears to lose his focus on worship while performing a miracle of healing. He is teaching in the synagogue, he is in the middle of his sermon, when a woman who has been bent over for eighteen years shuffles in. But Jesus doesn't tell her to sit down and be quiet and worship God. Instead, seeing her there in her need, he stops everything.

Now the leader of the synagogue is none too happy about

this. He thinks that Jesus should go on with his teaching. After all, there are six other days of the week to work and only one day to worship. Jesus should wait. That's what God commanded us to do: remember the Sabbath; keep it holy.

But Jesus doesn't wait. Without any introductions, without any interrogations, Jesus simply says to her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." And then he lays hands on her, and immediately she stands up straight and begins praising God. So Jesus interrupts worship on that Sabbath Day in order to set this woman free and she worships for the first time in many, many days. And that is why I chose this story for today, because it teaches us an important truth about the Who of worship.

There's a similar story in the Book of Acts, when Peter heals a man who every day sits and begs by the entrance to the temple. The man has never walked a day in his life, but when Peter commands him in the name of Christ to stand up

and walk, that man jumps up and goes into the temple with them, "walking and leaping and praising God." [Acts 3:8]

Now both of these stories say the same thing: first the healing, then the worship. And it makes me wonder whether we in the church don't have everything backwards. We have always tried to get people to come to worship so that they can experience God's healing, when the Bible suggests that it really happens the other way around. People have to encounter God before they can worship God. We have to experience healing on some level in our lives before we can praise God, from whom all blessings flow.

Jesus came to introduce us to that God and give us those blessings. He names the Who of worship when he says, in the synagogue in Nazareth, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to

proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [Luke 4:18] The poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed: that's most of us. Another time, Jesus said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." [Luke 5:31-2] That's the rest of us.

Jesus comes to set people free. Worship happens when healing happens. So when we think about the Who of worship, think about the ones we see every Sunday who have experienced healing in their lives and thank God for it by coming to worship. But also think of those who have not yet darkened the door because they haven't met Jesus yet, they haven't experienced healing yet. Many of them don't even know they are sick, and those who do probably don't know that the doctor they are waiting to see is divine.

That's our job, to help folks see the Good Doctor as he goes on his rounds in Willow Glen, binding up the broken-

hearted, strengthening the weak, forgiving the fallen, comforting them in their grief, healing their hurts, and giving their bent-over spirits a reason to want to stand up straight and praise God. That's what Building Hope and Open Table and the winter shelter and the Joint Youth Ministry and Vacation Bible School and Cross Walk and Sunday School and our small groups are all about: giving people a reason to worship God. So let's not fret too much about worship. All we need to do is what Jesus did: focus on the ones who need healing, go to them, and love them. Miracles of grace will happen. And when they do, worship will happen. And no one will die of boredom.