

Sermon: Why Worship?**Scripture: John 4:23****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: April 25th, 2010**

I'd like to talk for a little while this morning about why we are gathered here. Last Sunday night we held a confirmation class with the youth at John and Nancy Kerr's house and the topic was worship. We had a good conversation about the purpose of it. Why exactly do we gather each Sunday for worship? And I thought it would be worth our exploring that a bit this morning as well. I'd like to share 4 central reasons for why we worship and just for the fun of it I am going to introduce each reason with a joke

Reason Number 1: *Paddy was driving down the street in a sweat because he had an important meeting and couldn't find a parking place. Looking up to heaven he said, "Lord take pity on me. If you find me a parking place I promise I will go to Mass every Sunday for the rest of me life, and I'll even give up drinkin' me Irish whiskey!" Miraculously, a parking place appeared. Paddy looked up again and said, "Oh never mind, I found one."*

We come together and worship because we need to be reminded time and time again that there is a presence that is beyond us, that we are not the architects of our own lives, that we cannot control everything and we really don't control as much as we like to think – "oh never mind, I found a parking place myself". We need to remember that much, if not most all, of our lives is handed to us as pure gift. We are created in the very fibers of our being to bow in homage to something greater than ourselves. And so if we do not bow our knees to God then it's not as though we are not bowing our knees to anything. We will inevitably bow in adoration of something less than God – bowing to the money or the market, to our nation, to a Hollywood Star, to our career, or whatever else. Something will demand our allegiance for we are allegiance-givers at heart. So the question is to whom or to what are we giving our ultimate allegiance. We come worship to offer our allegiance to God... and not just to any God but a God of love and unity and reconciliation and peace. We come to worship, as we talked about in the confirmation class for one reason to pray to God together, to say "thank you" and "please" and "wow", to cultivate within us a spirit of gratitude, openness and praise. We come to worship because we want to hold God as front and center of our lives.

Reason Number 2: *Butch Hancock, a musician with a group called "The Flatlanders" is reported to have said about his fundamentalist Christian upbringing, "Life in Lubbock, TX taught me two things: One is that God loves you and you're going to burn in Hell. The other is that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth and you should save it for someone you love."*

Another reason we come together to worship is to regularly submit ourselves to the words of sacred scripture. Now as Butch Hancock's statement reminds us, we do have to be careful of how we are interpreting scripture – "God loves you and be careful lest you burn in Hell" – but mostly our sacred scriptures, which are poured over us in reading or song or sermon or prayer in the course of a worship service, speak to us of the reality of that higher presence we call God and we hear stories of how this God has been active in lives of others so that we can maybe more readily recognize the movement of God in our own lives. And we hear in an amazing way how the words of scripture speak to us personally and intimately. How many of us have sat in a worship service and been moved by how appropriate the scripture or the sermon or a song was to a very intimate and specific issue that is going on in our lives. That in my mind is not so much the power of the preacher or the singer as it is the power of the Spirit-inspired scriptures themselves, that can reach across the millennia and speak to us so directly and so intimately. A regular engagement with the scriptures makes that the script for the formation of our identity whether we are 13 or 63. And similar to what I was saying earlier, it's not a matter of whether we want to be formed by a particular script. We are formed by the scripts, the stories around us. The only question is what script do we want to be formed by. There are powerful scripts in our culture which tell us that our identity and our worth is based upon consumerism and consumption. There are stories that tell us that our value is based upon what we buy or accomplish or achieve. The scriptures and quintessentially the Christian scriptures tell us through story and parable and poem and prayer that our identity is not based upon anything we do but our identity and worth is granted to us as gift, it's based upon the Giver. We come to worship to submit ourselves to the script of sacred scripture.

Reason Number 3: *Alice Grayson was to bake a cake for the Baptist Church Ladies' Group in Tuscaloosa , but forgot to do it until the last minute. She remembered the morning of the bake sale and after rummaging through cabinets, found an angel food cake mix & quickly made it while drying her hair,*

dressing, & helping her son pack for Scout camp. When Alice took the cake from the oven, the center had dropped flat and the cake was horribly disfigured. She thought, "Oh dear, there is not time to bake another cake." This cake was important to Alice because she did so want to fit in at her new church and in her new community of friends. So, being inventive, she looked around the house for something to build up the center of the cake. Alice found it in the bathroom - a roll of toilet paper. She plunked it in and covered it with icing. Not only did the finished product look beautiful, it looked perfect. Before she left the house to drop the cake by the church and head for work, Alice woke her daughter Amanda and gave her some money and specific instructions to be at the bake sale the moment it opened at 9:30 and to buy the cake and bring it home. When Amanda arrived at the sale, she found the attractive, perfect cake had already been sold. She grabbed her cell phone and called her mom. Alice was horrified - she was beside herself. Everyone would know! What would they think? She would be ostracized, talked about, and ridiculed! All night, Alice lay awake in bed thinking about people pointing fingers at her and talking about her behind her back. The next day, Alice promised herself she would try not to think about the cake and would attend the fancy luncheon/bridal shower at the home of a fellow church member and try to have a good time. Alice did not want to attend because the hostess was a snob who more than once had looked down her nose at Alice because she was a single parent and not from the founding families of Tuscaloosa but, having already RSVP'd, she couldn't think of a believable excuse to stay home. The meal was elegant, the company was definitely upper crust old South and, to Alice 's horror, the cake in question was presented for dessert! Alice felt the blood drain from her body when she saw the cake! She started out of her chair to tell the hostess all about it, but before she could get to her feet, the Mayor's wife said, "What a beautiful cake!" Alice still stunned, sat back in her chair when she heard the hostess (who was a prominent church member) say, "Thank you, I baked it myself." Alice smiled and thought to herself, "God is good."

In the Christian spiritual tradition worship is front and center and it's not just worship but specifically corporate worship. From the beginning Christians have worshipped God but most significantly worshipped God *together*. Now this can be for better or worse it might seem at times because human community, as the previous joke reveals, can be messy, complicated, difficult at times. But the Christian spiritual path is not an individual one, it is necessarily a communal one. There are those who say to me, kind of joking and kind of not, that during the winter they worship on the mountain as they ski down it. And I laugh with them and usually say something like "well, you know where to find us when ski season is over," because the heck if I'm going to guilt trip them for it. But it's this number three reason – the gathering with our community of faith - and

the previous reason – submitting to sacred scriptures – that are the very heart of what we mean when we speak of worship and which make worship worship and skiing down a mountain on Sunday morning skiing down a mountain on Sunday morning. Now, I'll grant you the point that you can connect to God on top of a glorious sun-drenched mountain on Sunday morning just as well and sometimes maybe even better than in the pews at church, but I submit that it's not worship and that for it to be worship, as it is defined in the Christian tradition, you need to connect to God in and through connecting to sacred scripture and one another. I really don't say that to guilt any of you who took the winter off to ski. I'm only trying to clarify what it is that we mean when we speak of worship and why it's important...ok, so maybe I'm trying to guilt you a little bit! But the corporate, communal aspect of worship is critical. There's something about praying and singing and submitting ourselves to God and scripture together that is deeper and more powerful than when we do it alone. To sing "Alleluia, O sing praises" with one voice alone is one thing but to sing with a hundred voices gets us closer to transcendence, wouldn't you agree, closer to a sense of something much much bigger than us alone, even us 100 people alone, something much bigger. To say nothing of when we offer up prayers or share our announcements and joys and concerns that we are offering those into a larger body than ourselves that not only hold resources and support for us but simply a witness so that we are no longer alone. We come to worship in order to be together and no longer alone.

Reason Number 4: A minister was completing a temperance sermon. With great emphasis he said, 'If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river.' With even greater emphasis he said, 'And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river.' And then finally, shaking his fist in the air, he said, 'And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I'd take it and pour it into the river.' Sermon complete, he sat down. After a brief silence, the music director stood and cautiously announced, 'For our closing hymn, let us sing #365, Shall We Gather at the River...'

I'm not sure I can make any connection between this joke and my next point but I figured I'd tell it anyway. I had my list of reasons why for worship that I was prepared to lay out for the youth last Sunday but I was drawing the reasons from them as well and in the midst of that they came up with one that wasn't on my list but I loved it and want to

add it here. One of the youth, when I asked “so why in the world should we worship” said a single word in response – “sanctuary”. And when I asked what do you mean, he said “it’s quiet, peaceful, and safe”. And so that is my number 4 reason for why we worship together – to be in a place for even just an hour of our week that is filled with other people but where it is still, calm, peaceful and safe. And in that time of calm and quiet and safety we can finally open up to what is deep inside us, we can breath a little more deeply and freely, we can slow down and prepare ourselves to notice more fully the world around us... and maybe even more importantly the world *inside* of us. We can hear better the voice of our soul. We can notice maybe what we are afraid of or face more clearly what we are struggling with. Maybe we can finally say – ok, I’m ready to change. Or ok, I’m ready to trust God in this. Or maybe we can see a little more clearly the light that is shining for us though it has felt obscured, the signs that suggest God is at work, the little inspirations for how we can help our fellow brothers and sisters, or whatever might surface as a result of being in a place of sanctuary. Yes, of course, leave it to a 13 year old middle schooler to teach a 40 year old Master’s of Divinity degreed minister a key component of what worship is about.

Song: Lord prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true.

And with thanksgiving, I’ll be a living sanctuary for you.

Song: Wait for the light to shine