

At the Heart of Worship

Week 4 – Amos

Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard had an analogy called The Theater of Worship. You can certainly compare a worship service to a theater performance. There are some similarities, for sure. I mean, you have the platform here. You have rows of chairs facing the platform. I want you to think about if worship is like a theater.

I want you to imagine where the stage is. I want you to imagine who are the actors and then imagine who the audience is. Now, maybe you identified this raised platform up here as the stage, and the actors would be the band and speakers, the teachers, and anybody else who's up here on this stage. Maybe you identified the audience as you out there sitting in a row.

Søren asked us to see worship in a different kind of way. He has this analogy called theater of worship, but it's not what you imagine. So Søren asks us to look at worship this way: the entire worship center is the stage, and the entire body is the actors, the music, and the words. Those direct us as the conductor and the direction of the play, and then the audience is God.

If you think about Sunday worship last week, would God want to give us a standing ovation? How about each of us individually? How did we perform at worship last week? So if God's present, which we believe God is present when we gather together, and God is truly the audience of our time, praise and worship together, would God have the same things to say about our worship as God did, about the worship that was happening in the time of the Prophet?

AMOS So Amos, Chapter 5 versus 21, says this: The Lord says, I hate I reject your festivals. I don't enjoy your joyous assemblies. If you bring me your entirely burned offering and gifts of food, I won't be pleased. I won't even look at your offerings of welfare, food, or animals. Take away the noise of your songs. I won't listen to the melody of your heart's harps.

Good thing we don't use harps here, right? So we're safe there. What are we doing? Gathering for worship every single Sunday? If this is how God views worship. The question today is, what is worship, and are we doing it right now? Much of what I will say about worship comes from this book called Soul Feast.

I've talked about it before. It's by Margery Thompson. It's an incredible book, and I'll reference it a couple of times. But worship is a time of connection with God. It comes through prayers in other ways. Any way we connect with God, we are worshiping. We can worship online, or we can worship in nature, which I'm a huge fan of. All of these ways that we worship are good and great, but there's also a need for us to worship as a group as we gather together. We cannot live a spiritual life in total isolation from the Christian community.

To be a Christian is to be joined to the body of Christ. That's what it means right now in North Carolina: the United Methodist General Conference is happening, and it's actually there on Sabbath today. They took Sunday off, but the conference goes on. It started on April 23rd, and it goes all the way to May 3rd.

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church is the only body that can set official policy and speak for the international denomination. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, would call this holy conferencing or Christian conferencing is another way to say, but holy conferencing is a way for us to discern the will of God and to try to listen for God's voice as we are in conversation with one another.

And so that's what's happening in North Carolina right now. Here is kind of a fact sheet. I don't know if you can read all of these things, but it's this kind of a fact sheet about the general conference. There are four official written languages, so ten languages are spoken by interpretation, and there are 862 delegates, delegates representing five continents around the world, which is awesome.

Our very own reverend, Dr. Ashley Alley Crawford is there at the general conference. She is a reserve delegate, which is pretty awesome. There are 1099 valid petitions that were submitted and they do that in plenary sessions and they have 14 different legislative committees.

In the general conference, the United Methodist Church is structured a lot like the our U.S. government. So right in the middle of this fact sheet, it says that they have 18 worship services, 13 day conference, 18 worship services. I love that this is right in the center of what's going on. They're gathering they're sharing stories as individuals to connect to the community and worship is in the middle of it all.

The United Methodist Church, as you can see, is a worldwide denomination. It's amazing that we have this connection with God's children worldwide. The general conference does its best to make decisions to allow people and communities in different places, in different contexts, and in different areas of the world to worship God, to share the good news, the Gospel of Jesus, and to be a ministry in one and with one another throughout the world.

This is a big task that the general has before them. And because it's a big task, I am asking for big prayers. I would invite you to join me in praying for them over the next week or so as they continue to meet. When we gather for worship, we have a time of prayer and a time of song, and we have sometimes the sacrament.

Once we read scripture, we hear a message, and these things give the church life. When we know that worship is supposed to be filled with all of these things we know it's filled with God's grace and God's presence. And if we can recognize everyone as actors and participants in worship, there are barriers that get in the way of how present we can be and how we connect with God.

Maybe that barrier could look like the other actors around. You seem bored or passive, right? That can get in the way of you worshipping if we feel judged or unaccepted in a place that can, whether that's a real or perceived reality, can get in our way the way of worship. If we come to worship and we're looking for a specific message or a specific scripture to help us with where we are in our life, but instead, we hear a scripture or a passage that is not connecting with us, that can get in the way.

If the band, gasp, plays a new song that we're not familiar with, that can get in the way, maybe when the prayer is spoken like it doesn't capture what's in your heart, and so maybe that can get in our way. Maybe you're looking for more silent meditation in the service, but you're not getting that. Maybe you long for the freedom to dance and move, but you feel like the atmosphere doesn't allow for that.

Maybe you sit near a bunch of high schoolers. Sorry, I had to. I had to. I love you guys. Right? That can get in the way, right? Distractions are all around us. Not to mention all of the things that we bring to worship that we're carrying from our worlds. And we bring them here.

Things can get in the way. Any time we think, wow, this is a new song, I don't know this, or I'm distracted by something in the room. Any time we think those thoughts, we've stopped worshipping. Now, the thoughts creep in like it is hard not to be distracted. They creep in for all of us, but it gets in the way of worship.

So how do we become actors in this human play of worship before God when there are so many distractions around us, especially when most of you don't have a direct say in what happens in the worship service every Sunday? Here's what we can do. We can change the way we enter worship. We can take responsibility for our own experience. We prepare, we engage, and we expect to hear from God.

The first thing is to prepare, to have some preparation before we come to worship. Now, I remember in 2020, just months, we were we were several months into like online only worship, right? You remember this. And I was one of the pastors at the church.

I remember making a video about worship. You probably had a similar experience to this, but the video went something like this. I said, for the first few months of online only worship like this is this is what happened in my household. Tom and Lex are our youngest and I.

So the three of us would sit down about five or 10 minutes before worship started, sometimes even 15 minutes before. Right. We'd get it ready on the TV and we'd also have like our laptop or iPad out. We could connect with people, right. Just like we do in the atrium, right? We want to connect with people.

People would join in, and we'd say, hi, how are you doing? That was the only connection when we were doing worship online. We would the music would start, and we would sing out loud. We would sing in our living room, worshipping God, and sometimes I'd raise my hands right there in the living room, and we'd hold hands during the time of prayer.

Then, one day, it happened without warning. One weekend, we were working on a project around the house, as we had done right. And we knew it was nearly time for worship. And I'm on the ladder. I'm holding up a light fixture. Tom's like fixing the wires or doing whatever he's doing, I turn, and I look at the clock.

It's like worship time. So, I yell for Lex. I'm like, Lex, can you come and set the iPad up? Because it's time worship and the worship leader comes on and the music begins and we start singing kind of along to the music and, and I'm raising my hands, but not to worship God. I'm still holding the light fixture and, and we're still half singing and we finish up quick.

We put some stuff away, and Lex goes to the kitchen to get a snack. We finally settle in after the prayer, and we sit through the rest of the service. But my heart is not in it like I'm present, but I just wasn't present. Like, you know what? I'm talking about. We have to be intentional about our time of worship because it is so easy for us to be just crafted that we can be so distracted that we forget about what worship is all about.

Now, it's especially intentional to be present for worship when you have an additional role in the worship service, whether you're in a band or you're speaking in some way. And I know for me personally, if I don't prepare for worship to worship, then I'm not worshipping. And sometimes you'll see me over here.

I love to sing, but sometimes you'll see me just stop singing, and I'll close my eyes. Sometimes, I'll put my hands out, and I'm praying. I'm praying for the Holy Spirit to be

present with us. I'm praying for the Holy Spirit to be present in me as I prepare to give the message. And I sometimes have to do that repeatedly in order to make sure that I'm ready to worship, that I'm here to worship.

Now, here is I love this book, but there is a crazy idea that I read in this book and I and I read it. It was just one sentence and I was like, I can't even believe this is real life. Like, does this actually happen in places? Because I'm not sure that I've ever seen it here. I hope you know that I'm being sarcastic.

Okay, here's the sentence. Many people find it helpful to arrive for worship 10 minutes early in order to prepare themselves to worship God from the heart, you know? Okay, for the 9:00 service, you guys actually do better than the later service. A later service. I don't even think they know what time the worship service starts. I remember my first Sunday; it was July 3rd, 2022, and the staff warned me that they were like Mandy. The second service, they don't show up until well after the service starts. I dismiss them a little bit. I'm like, you know, I've been around church for a long time. I know people trickle in after the service starts, but on July 3rd, that second service, Tom, Lex, and I were sitting here, right here in the front row, the middle section, and we stand up to worship. And I'm like, There is nobody here.

This is going to be really awkward if I have to get up on stage and preach to Lex and Tom in the front row. But I don't know. In the second or third song, I looked behind me, and, okay, there were people here. I am kind of joking, but might this actually help you prepare for worship?

Because preparation is important. Getting here a few minutes early might help you prepare for worship because it really, we really need to do whatever it takes for us to be fully present with God in this moment of worship. Now, also, I want to note, like I understand, I remember what it was like to have little kids and get them up.

I remember what it was like to have school-age kids and teenagers, right? It's hard to get them up, to get them halfway dressed, to get them in the car, to get them here, and to get them on time. And so maybe you were just like saying like, how who has time to prepare for worship? If you're in that boat, maybe you play a worship song on your way, on your car ride over.

If you live close by, maybe you walk here because if you're outside, you're it automatically allows you some space to connect with the Creator. Maybe that'll make you even later. I get that, but maybe it's for you. You can finally prepare for worship when you get to your

seat, right? You get to your seat. Maybe the music's already started and maybe you just take a second to close your eyes, to say a prayer, to say, All right, God, I want to be fully present for you. Help me be present.

Now, this next sentence. We could spend a whole sermon. But I do want to say this in preparation. It isn't just about the moments before we arrive. It's about staying connected all week. It's about worshipping all week. Right here. We're worshipping as the body, but we should be worshipping all week, connecting with God through prayer, in Scripture, and in other things.

We show up, we're prepared, and we expect to hear from God. Now, sometimes we come to worship saying, okay, well, what am I going to get out of worship today? Or maybe you leave worship, and you're like, that message. I didn't get anything out of that message today. But our main goal in worship is to participate.

It is to be an actor who shows gratitude to God, our Creator. That's why we are here in worship. When we do that, sometimes our lives change, and sometimes other people's lives change because our lives have changed. But it's really not about what we get from the world, the music, or the message, but rather what God receives from us.

Now, God is not just the audience. God is actively participating in our time together. God is not passive. And when we are open to the kind of worship that God longs for, we will certainly feel God's nudge, and we will hear God's heart. We show up. We expect to hear from God. But it might not be what you are expecting. Maybe you come to worship, and you're carrying this burden with you.

In the time of prayer, maybe you're distracted by the beautiful cry of a baby or maybe a toddler throwing a fit, or maybe somebody is on their phone, and it dings or something, and you're distracted, and your mind is brought to something else. Or maybe that moment you pray for that child, or you pray for all of the children of Horizons or around the world or whatever it is, maybe God is speaking to you at that moment.

Expect to hear from God when you show up to work worship, but expect the unknown expected, and you might hear God through the music, listening to the lyrics through the prayer or the message, or simply by making a connection with someone around you in this community, we have to participate. We have to actually engage in worship in order to worship.

You are on the stage like you are a participant in worship, and you can worship in so many different ways. Maybe you use your body to worship, and maybe you don't feel right kneeling. But if that's what's going to help you connect with God. Please kneel.

When we are speaking with others if we want to get our point across, we're using our hands. And so maybe when you speak with God here in this time of worship, you raise your hands, you open them, you place them on your heart, too, to feel the spirit inside of you. Maybe you close your eyes during the music and you just listen to the lyrics, or you focus on one of the crosses in the room.

Singing also is an incredible way to connect with God. There is something different and special about a group of people gathering and singing, especially when we're when these voices are being raised to God. If you don't normally sing out loud, you're like, I'm a terrible singer. Something crazy and magical happens when we all sing together, and all of the voices just blend together somehow to make this beautiful sound. We have one more song after the message, so maybe you can do something a little bit different during that last song.

What exactly does God want from us? Because there's no formula for how we worship, Right? It's going to look differently for you than it does for me. And it's going to look different for all of us, as long as our heart is in it. That's the key. Our heart has to be in worship to be worshipping. Now, we want you to hear this passage again. The same passage I read from Amos chapter five. But this time, it's from the message translation. So the Lord says, I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions. I want nothing to do with your religion projects, your pretentious slogans and goals. I'm sick of your fundraising schemes, your public relations, and image-making. I've had all I can take of your noisy ego music. When was the last time you sang to me?

And then the next verse says this. It's the most quoted verse in Amos, including in Martin Luther King Jr I Had a Dream speech. Amos 5:24 says The Lord says, Do you know what I want? I want justice- oceans of it. I want fairness- rivers of it. That's what I want. That's all I want. Now, here's from this translation. This is one that you might recognize better, same verse, but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. That's what God wants from us. And God is saying to those in Israel.

He's not saying worship itself was wrong. He was saying it was the worshipers themselves who didn't have their hearts tuned in right. Justice and righteousness are requirements of coming before God. You think of this never-failing stream, and you think about the water sin and the plant life and the human life and the animal life that flourishes where there is water for Christians. For followers of Jesus, human life flourishes where there is justice and righteousness.

Worship is simply gratitude for God, our Creator, and gratitude for God, our Creator brings action because we will start to want what the Creator wants. In worship, we come

together, we unite, and we unite with light, truth, grace, and peace. We unite so that we can fight against the powers of darkness and destruction that exist in the world. If we see fairness, justice, and righteousness in our lives, then we will know that God is pleased with our worship.

Now, here is another great passage from Amos as we wrap up our sermon series on Amos and begin a new sermon series next week; we're going to be revealing our vision statement next week, and it's a statement that will bring us forward. It will bring us focused on the future as we remember the past sacrifice of Jesus and onward beyond the ends of the earth. I hear this verse from Amos Chapter Five, verses 14 and 15: Seek good and not evil that you may live. And so, the Lord, the God of Heavenly forces, will be with you just as He, just as you have said, hate evil, love good, and establish just justice at the city gate.

Perhaps the Lord God of Heavenly forces will be gracious to what is left of Jos. Joseph Webster's Dictionary definition of worship says This worship is to honor with extravagant love and extreme submission. True worship is not defined by the place, the style, or the order of worship, but true worship is defined and determined by the priority we place on it.

On who God is in our lives and where God is on our list of priorities. True worship is a matter of the heart loving, good, hating, evil, and having a heart that is ready to worship where worship becomes this non-negotiable priority in our life. God created us to worship. God created us to connect with our Creator. So we prepare for that. We expect to hear from God. We engage in worship so that we can be holy and righteous and just. Just as God created us to be.

Would you pray with me? Gracious God, thank you so much for this place that we are able to gather for worship, the willingness of the people here to be present with you. We are so thankful for this time and may you be pleased with our worship. May you see our hearts are fully in it and may you see that when we leave this place that we continue to worship all week long and through that worship, we are fighting for justice and righteousness and holiness because, God, we know that there are people in our cities, in our communities.

We know people in our neighborhoods, maybe even our families, who don't know love and your grace and your peace. So allow us to be here and to be present with you so that we can be a light to the world. Help us to be better worshipers. We want to show you gratitude today and tomorrow and forever. We say this in the name of Jesus. Amen.