

“Poor Time Management”
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Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 16)
Psalm 111

First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
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Many of you may be aware that there is an ongoing conversation within and between many Christian churches, regardless of denomination, about how to grow. As pastors and parishioners we seemed obsessed with the numbers. In many churches and denominations, the conversation quickly turns to worship, as that is usually the place that new members come to know a church. Should we worship with organ and choir, or should we do it with guitar and electric piano? Should we sing hymns from a hymnal, or should we sing something more contemporary, easier to learn and memorize, easier to sing, projecting the words on a large screen? Should the preacher be in a pulpit, or on the floor? With notes or without notes? Should the sermons be about the bible, or about contemporary issues in the lives of the people? Lots of ritual and symbol or less ritual and symbol? Highly structured or free flowing? The list goes on and on.

Much is written about these so-called worship wars with people lining up either on the side of contemporary worship, or on the side of traditional worship. At the center of the debate seems to be what way will be most attractive to young people we want to come to church while holding that in tension with what way will be most satisfying to the people who are already in our church.

Interestingly, the Psalm for today also raises issues related to worship and growth, but in a very different manner. The growth it mentions is growth in wisdom. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have good understanding.” Generally, we understand the phrase “fear of the lord” to mean “right relationship towards God” or “reverence for the awesomeness of God.” Is our worship about gaining and keeping members, or is it about something much bigger, much much bigger, that is the worship and praise of a God so big, so profound, so unimaginable that no single form of music could possibly be adequate. What frustrates me about the worship wars is that it focusing the conversation in the totally wrong direction. It makes church about marketing, about producing a product that consumers, ie new members, will find appealing. Worship is not a product to be consumed, it is an action in which we engage. We don't *come* to worship, we

come *to worship*, to engage in the act of praising and thanking God. Worship is not a place, it is an action.

And if we do it right, then we grow in wisdom, as we place ourselves in the appropriate relationship to God.

Let me be clear on this point. God doesn't care how we worship. God doesn't care if it is a pipe or lyre, a harp, a flute, a piano, an electric piano, an organ, a guitar a five piece band, or simply banging on an old trash can lid. God doesn't care. God will not love us more, or give us more, or appreciate us more if our worship is beautiful or if it is wretched.

Why then do we pay organists and section leaders, why do we have so many people in the choir give up so many hours learning and rehearsing and practicing music if God doesn't care? Why do pastors throughout the country spend countless hours preparing sermons and writing prayers? Because, I believe, God is worth it. Speaking only for myself now, God's presence in my life has been so profound, that I want to do my very best praising and thanking and worshiping every time. God's love for me will not change, that is the Good News of Jesus Christ, but how I respond to that fact is what gives my life meaning. What changes, based on worship, is me, is us. Our worship is a response to God's ever-welcoming, ever-enveloping love. Worship is not about God, but rather, in its best moments, worship is a place where we encounter God, a time when we feel the Spirit come over us. It changes us and gives us a new identity, distinct from who and what we are "out there." In worship there are there are only children of God, with a propensity towards sin and yet still the beloved and blessed of God, and so we come to offer thanks and praise.

Worship is, in some ways, a rather bold act of defiance in a culture that praises and prizes effects and outcomes. Efficiency and effectiveness, good time management, these are the things that our culture tells us are important. Worship is certainly not efficient and depending on what effect you are measuring, often not effective either. I'm just guessing, but if we were to survey this gathered assembly and ask what do you wish you had more of, my guess is that time would be near the top of practically everyone's list. Presumably each of us has something else we could be doing right now. Some project that needs starting or finishing, some person we could be spending time with. And yet, we've chosen for some strange reason, to get ourselves into some presentable fashion (not that God cares, but we seem to think it matters for some reason). We plunk ourselves down in an uncomfortable chair or pew, often sitting by strangers. We listen to words read from old books, we

sing out loud even when we aren't good singers, we pray out loud even when we don't always understand the meaning behind the words, we share the good and bad of our lives and the world around us, we give away our money, and we go home. And many of us do it week after week after week. Worship is time poorly managed because it is about extravagance. It is, in the words of author Marva Dawn, a royal waste of time.¹

Psalm 111 begins "Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation." Worship is a gift we offer God, because God is so good. Because God is so worthy of praising, or in the words of Psalm 111, "Great are the works of the Lord," and "full of honor and majesty is God's work," "Holy and awesome is God's name." When we gather together in uncomfortable chairs and do uncomfortable things, we are wasting our time, being neither efficient, nor especially effective, engaging in an act of lavish praising. Managing our time poorly, we give God the gift of our time, which for most of us an especially precious gift to give. And we do it because God is good. God is so good.

Do people leave worship awed and inspired, energized and engaged? I hope so. Will new people, new families become part of this congregation, part of this particular manifestation of the body of Christ? I hope so. Will people find a connection with the church of their earlier years, with the great living faith of generations past? I hope so. But none of these is the purpose of worship. While churches argue, fuss, and fight about the best way to gain new members, I hope and pray we'll continue to be here, wasting our precious time, knowing God won't love us more because of it. Knowing God will not be changed by what we do in worship, but hopefully we, and the world around us, will be.

(Congregation joins in repeating words from the Psalm) "Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Amen.

¹ Dawn, Marva J. *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. (Grand Rapids, MI 1999).