

The Heart of Worship

5/5 in Series

ACTS

Psalm 150 (Responsive Reading)

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Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish theologian who lived in the 19th century, compared worship to a play performed in a theater. In such a setting, most assume that the congregation is the audience. The worship leaders are the actors performing on the stage. And the Holy Spirit serves as a prompter—off stage and out of sight—who occasionally reminds the characters of their lines.

However, Kierkegaard said that such an understanding of worship is fundamentally flawed. The members of the congregation are not the audience; instead, they are the actors who gather to actively participate in worship. The worship leaders serve as the prompters, helping others to fully engage in worship. And God, God is an *Audience of One* before whom we perform.

Actually, I believe that the true spirit of worship is found somewhere between these two extremes. Neither the congregation nor God is a passive audience simply observing worship. We are all active participants in the verb of worship.

Perhaps a better way to talk about worship is to recognize it as a place where God and God's people **meet**. We gather together in the presence of the Holy. We actively participate in the worship of our Lord, and God in turn acts in our lives.

Today we are concluding *The Heart of Worship* series. During the past four weeks, we have used the acronym of **ACTS** as an outline for the sermons. ACTS stands for Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Today we are incorporating all four elements into the service we celebrate *Holy Communion*. I am also reprising portions of the previous sermons as we experience each element of worship.

Act 1: Adoration

ACTS—the **A** stands for **adoration**. The first act of worship is adoring God. Adoration is praising God for who God is. It is pure praise with no other motivation or agenda. True adoration focuses upon the Lord alone.

A **catechism** is an ancient teaching method of the church which instructs people in the faith through a series of questions and answers. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks the question: “*What is the chief end of humanity?*” The answer: “*Humanity’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.*”

Adoration is the glorification of God—and our ultimate desire is to enjoy dwelling in God's presence forever. At its best, worship gives us “*a foretaste of glory divine*” as we adore and praise our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Praise spans the emotional and spiritual spectrum. Sometimes we adore God with high energy and volume; other times we praise God quietly and reflectively. Adoration occurs in worship in a rich diversity of ways.

- 1) Adoration is often expressed in the **hymns and songs** of the church. The Holy Spirit inspires gifted composers to capture praise in rhythm and rhyme. And it's not only the words but also the music that brings us into the divine presence.
- 2) We adore God in our **prayers**. In our divine appointments with God, praise bubbles up inside us like an artesian well. Individual and corporate prayer grants us the opportunity to express our love and devotion to our Lord.
- 3) A third way we express adoration is through the reading of **Scripture**. So many Biblical passages lead us in glorifying God. The Psalms are a primer of praise.
- 4) We also worship God physically with our **bodies**. Choir and congregation stand to sing. We close our eyes and bow our heads. People kneel at the altar in prayer.
We hear the splash of water during Holy Baptism. The taste of bread and juice fill our mouths at Holy Communion. Gritty ashes mark the sign of the cross on our foreheads during the Ash Wednesday service.
Some people raise their hands in adoration. Others clap their hands to the beat of the music. During confirmation, the pastors lay hands on the heads of those dedicating their lives to Jesus Christ.
Christ called us to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and we worship in the same way—with the entirety of our being, adoring God because God IS God!

Act 2: Confession

ACTS: The **C** stands for **Confession**. The second act of worship is confessing our sins. Confession is a dense word packed with weighty meaning. It is not an action to be taken lightly. At its root, confession means the acknowledgement and admission of sin.

Confession is NOT informing God about some secret sin. The Lord already knows! Instead, confession is agreeing with God about the sin in our lives. The Holy Spirit convicts and convinces us of our sin.

James 1:22-25 says that truly hearing God's Word is like gazing intently into a mirror. We see ourselves through our heavenly Father's eyes. The Spirit calls and challenges us to become more than what we are.

Confessing our sin is an essential part of faith and worship; however, confession does not come easily to us. It requires us to do something that we studiously avoid: **claim responsibility** for our sinfulness. And it is SO hard for us to admit that we were wrong!

The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin. And we deny. Alibi. Take the fifth. Plead extenuating circumstances. Justify our actions. And even when our guilt is proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, we still attempt to prevaricate, equivocate, evade, and avoid.

We are also quite skilled at making **qualified** confessions. If we finally admit our guilt, then we plead extenuating circumstances. James Moore wrote a book entitled *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned but I Have Several Excellent Excuses!* In reality, we stand before God with no excuses.

Our Scripture lesson today reminds us: "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*" (1 John 1:8) True confession cuts through the human

desire to deny responsibility and accountability. It drives us to stand with the prophet Isaiah in total humility and submission before God.

Confession is the first movement of repentance that leads to accepting God's **forgiveness** in our lives. Hear the rest of the 1 John passage: "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" (1 John 1:9). John's choice of the word "**purify**" gives us another insight into confessing our sins. Confession is the first step towards experiencing God's **healing** in our lives.

The Psalmist says that God takes our sin and casts it as far as east is from west. Another Psalm declares that God casts our sin into "*a pool of forgetfulness.*" God forgives us, and gives us the grace to forgive ourselves and others.

When we celebrate **Holy Communion** in the church, it is traditionally preceded by a *Prayer of Confession*. We confess our sins both individually and corporately. There is a powerful moment after the confession when the pastor stands before the people. Claiming a priest's role for the congregation, the pastor declares, "*In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.*" And the people echo back to the pastor, "*In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.*"

Act 3: Thanksgiving

ACTS: The **T** stands for **Thanksgiving**. The next act of worship is giving God thanks. Thanksgiving is a vital part of personal devotion and public worship. It is essential to Christian discipleship. An attitude of gratitude nurtures faith; an attitude of ingratitude causes faith to wither and die.

The apostle **Paul** encouraged Christian disciples to cultivate a spirit of thanksgiving. Our Scripture lesson today captures the heart of Paul's teaching about gratitude:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thanksgiving. (Colossians 2:6-7)

Thanksgiving is not a day or a season in the church—it is a daily spiritual discipline. Thanksgiving encompasses three movements of faith:

- 1) Recognize the gift
- 2) Recognize the Giver
- 3) Give thanks

Colossians 2:7 is applicable both for individual faith and public worship—we are called to be "*overflowing with Thanksgiving.*" The heart of worship is a joyful place where God's people are overwhelmed with grace upon grace.

C. S. Lewis said that joy is "*the serious business of heaven.*" Even in the most somber and sacred of worship services, there is an undercurrent of thanksgiving and praise. We gather today to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ who lived, died, and rose

again so that we might enjoy life, abundant life, and everlasting life. If that doesn't put a smile on your face, then I don't know what will!

We are called to overflow with thanksgiving in our individual lives and corporate worship. When we allow a spirit of gratitude to brim to the spilling in our lives, something amazing occurs. The act of thanksgiving is a powerful discipline that affects our relationship with self, others, and God.

The Great Thanksgiving in Holy Communion rehearses the gift of salvation that God grants us through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Act 4: Supplication

ACTS: The **S** stands for **Supplication**. The final act of worship is bringing our needs to God. Synonyms for supplication include plea, petition, prayer, request, and entreaty. We ask our Heavenly Father to intercede on his children's behalf.

Philippians 4:6 instructs us: *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."*

We intuitively understand that supplication is a vital part of our personal prayer life. Much of our private devotion involves praying for ourselves and others.

Worship encompasses the same attitude of supplication. We all come to church seeking and asking for something in our lives and world. We hope and pray that something significant will occur during this hour together.

Prayer . . . worship . . . ultimately supplication is reflective of the entire Christian faith. The act of supplication recognizes that there is a basic "given-ness" to life in general and the Christian life in particular. The theological word for this is **grace**. The very act of asking acknowledges that GOD is the author of *"every good and perfect gift."* (James 1:17) And it is our heavenly Father's good pleasure to bless his children richly.

The Bible repeatedly portrays God as our Heavenly Father who wants to bless his children. Earthly parents and grandparents understand this desire. They want the very best for their children and grandchildren. So why do we so often live in spiritual want?

The answer is painfully simple: we don't receive because we do not ask. James 4:2 states this basic truth: *"You do not have because you do not ask God."*

When we bring our needs before God, we do not come to a God who is indifferent to our plight, who cares nothing for our needs, or who measures out grace by the ounce. Instead, we come confidently in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. We pray with importunity, persistence, shamelessness, and boldness!

In Romans 8:32, Paul writes: *"He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"*

Supplication is ultimately based in God's nature and character. Because we understand God loves us and wants the best for us, we can come in confidence before him with our requests. God's response is not based upon the quality or quantity of our faith, the way we word our prayers, the number of times we repeat them. Instead, it is based upon who God is and the depths of divine love.

How we enter church often determines how we leave. Our preparation, expectation, and anticipation can dramatically shape our worship experience. If you come

half-heartedly and reluctantly, expecting little or nothing, then this is often what you will receive. If you come enthusiastically and eagerly, expecting a blessing, then this is often what you will receive. Of course, God is God, and the Lord is not defined by human limitations. However, we certainly play our part in supplication.

After you receive Holy Communion, you are invited to kneel at the altar and bring your supplications to our God—who is ever more ready to listen than we are to speak.

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