

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Elaine Fennell, associate pastor of Grace United Church of Christ, at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 10, August 21, 2011, dedicated to the glory of God!

“What is True Worship?”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation.

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I bring you greetings from Grace United Church of Christ where Ron Hall is pastor and where I serve as associate pastor.

I thank God for your Pastors Tim and Dr. Janine for inviting me to stand before you once again and proclaim God’s word. It’s been almost a year since I last worshiped at First. So, I feel as though I’m coming home for a visit. For those of you who know my husband, Alton, he sends his greetings. He had an offer to go camping from Ana and Ava, his two granddaughters, and he just could not refuse this weekend with them. So, he is spending time camping with his son, William, and his two wonderful granddaughters. The men took the girls camping this weekend in the Poconos Mountains. It’s a first!

I’d like to thank my wonderful son Kris for being with me this morning; he has become my constant companion in life and ministry. I thank God for our relationship. Thanks be to God for each of you for choosing to be in worship at First Church this morning. God has smiled on us together again and brought us safely to this Sunday morning to glorify, honor and acknowledge God’s holy presence in our lives.

Today, I want to share my belief with you about “True Worship.” We come to First Church to worship and praise God in this anointed and sacred space. We come to connect with our friends and family in Christ. We greet each other in fellowship, we praise God in song, teach the word of Christ, exhort God’s name, we pray for each other, give our tithes, and we leave filled with the knowledge of God’s grace in our lives and energized to face the world next week. Is that all there is to worship? Is that what worship is to you? Does worship end when you leave this place? What is true worship?

Let us pray! Loving God and gracious God, we give you the glory and honor for the movement of your Holy Spirit in around, among and between us this morning. Speak to our hearts this morning. Let the words of my mouth be the meditations that you have placed in my heart to share heart to heart, soul to soul with the people of God. Come Lord Jesus, your handmaiden is available and willing to be used by your Holy Spirit. Speak through me, your words of life. In Jesus name, Amen.

Worship is what we do in this place on Sunday morning. Again, I thank God for your presence because God’s word says where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of thee. God is always there for each of us, but his presence is more profound and more powerful when we gather with the express purpose of glorifying God’s name.

We do worship God by going to fellowship with other believers. God woke us up this morning and started us on our way. He gathered us here today to be his image of grace. I don’t know about you, but for me this is the joy of worship. The gathering to say, I’m still here through God’s grace. I’m still here in the midst of the joys and storms of life. I may be having trouble on my job, I may be laid off, my 401k is sinking slowly, my bank account is declining, I’m without health care, but thanks be to God, I am still here to proclaim God’s grace.

So, I’m going to worship God this morning. God is good

all the time. That is the reason you and I make time to worship and remember God on Sundays. But, what happens on Monday – Saturday? Do you think about God? Were you gracious enough to give him a time on your calendar during the week? Or is Sunday a.m. worship “it” for you?

That’s what **part-time worshippers** do. Believe me, I know because I have been there, done that. In my 20s and 40s I fought through the work week, making it to church a couple of times a month, but leaving feeling good with promises of a commitment soon when I have more time.

For **part-time worshippers**, it’s a time once a week to meet, greet and think about God and His goodness, but these worshippers put God on a shelf during the week and worship is perceived mostly as a social activity, a time to network. Is this where you are in your worship life today?

Then, there’s the **Christmas/Easter worshippers**. They show up drawn into the season wanting to connect with the spirit of Santa Claus. The gift giving takes precedence over the birth of Christ. On Easter, there is the Easter Bunny that vies for center stage with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. You surely can’t forget those wonderful Easter egg hunts. What do Easter Eggs and Christmas gifts mean to worship? Think about it.

Then, there’s the **give me** worshipper. God, I’ll go to worship if you will just give me that good job, heal my cancer, heal my child, give me a new house, give me good grades in school, give me, give me, give me, etc. When they get what they want or lose interest or faith in getting the object of their worship, they stop coming so often or stop coming all together.

These are just a few of the reasons why people are drawn to worship. Do you notice yourself in any of these scenarios? I have to say that I’ve been there, done that in my life. But when I really dedicated my life to God and let God’s spirit lead me, I started understanding what the heck Paul was talking

about when he wrote about “true worship” and “making your body a living sacrifice.”

You truly meet God in your life when there’s nowhere else to turn. When you’ve come to the end of yourself and tried everything else, you remember that God has been waiting for you to shed the confusion of the world, and it’s then when we have time to listen and spend with God. This is the one Lord, one faith and one baptism that by faith gave Abraham and Sarah the ability to be parents in their old age; the same God who by faith led Jacob to wrestle with an angel of God until he was blessed; the same God who parted the Red Sea and let Moses lead his people to the Promised Land, and the same God who loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Jesus is the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world. That means he takes all of our confusion, depression, misunderstanding, sadness and disappointment and turns it into faith; then he somehow steps into these critical moments in our lives when we truly seek God. But, not for what we can get out of him, but what we then willingly give to God.

When I started my journey to be a true worshiper, the spirit of God pointed to my mother, who is the great granddaughter of a slave. She gave each one of her children the tools to become true worshippers because she set the Christian example. She had no material means except what my father gave her. She defied hunger for her children and family by making delicacies out of flour, corn meal, potatoes, greens and chicken (on Sunday). She sang the church hymns she learned in childhood while she worked in the kitchen.

In times of trial, in times of joy, she never stopped worshipping God. She never gave up and she never allowed any of us to give up. We were faced with many obstacles in our lives, because we were children of American slave ancestry, but my mother gave her children the most precious

gift of all, Jesus. She gave us the dignity of being able to stand up and say that we are all God's children. No matter what your lot in life, God will take care of you. Mother is 88 years old now and to this day she continues to boast and recount her story of coming to God, in the midst of the trials of a changing nation and the new life in the spirit she was given that day when she remembers completely giving her life to God.

This is an old slave's journey. From the cotton fields of Georgia to the corn fields of Ohio, mother proclaims God's goodness in her life when she says. "What I've been through didn't hurt me none, because what the devil meant for my death, God meant to give me life." My mother is a living testimony, a living praise and a true worshiper of God.

Paul in his letter to the Romans was addressing this type of worship in identifying our new life in Christ. In the NRSV (12:1) it is translated as "spiritual worship." In the Good News Bible, it is translated a "true worship."

"So then, my brothers, because of God's mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer." (Good News)

Sunday worship gets you to the door of true worship or spiritual worship. Sunday worship has all the elements of living our new life in Christ. We greet each other with loving, holy hugs and welcomes; we share our space with anyone who comes to worship; we pray together; we dine together; we exhort the name of God; we sing God's praises; we give our tithes for the edification and building of the kingdom; we allow the Holy Spirit of God to rule during this brief time on Sunday.

This is the worship that should run over the world with God's goodness as we move from this place to our communities and homes. We worship God when we are good to our neighbors; we worship God when we feed the hungry;

we worship God when God becomes our moral compass that guides us to support laws that fight poverty and hunger; Sojourner Truth says what we give to the poor, we lend to God; we worship God when we study peace and not war; and we worship God by making our life a living sacrifice allowing God's grace to flow through us to others.

"It is curious that people who are filled with horrified indignation whenever a cat kills a sparrow can hear that story of the killing of God told Sunday after Sunday and not experience any shock at all." - ***Dorothy Sayers***

For the true worshipper, the story of the cross, the story of Jesus' sacrifice for us should have some affect on your life. The story of the cross should bring you to God's altar of thanksgiving. Because if it had not been for the gift that God gave us through his son Jesus, we would not be here today. This true worship changes your life. It consumes your earthly being. You begin to know that "earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal." (Thomas Moore)

But, it's not an instant fall, but you fall into offering yourselves as living sacrifices to God. You begin dedicating your life, your love and resources to God's service, knowing what is pleasing to God. God becomes your moral compass. We are told in scripture, to seek first the kingdom of God and then all things will be added to us.

What stops us from becoming true worshippers? In Matthew, Jesus gives a reality check to his disciples. In the midst of Jesus' miracles and healings, he stops and gathers his disciples together and asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The disciples say some say John the Baptist, but others say Elijah and others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets. (16:13) Then Jesus directs the question specifically to the disciples. Only one of the disciples, Simon Peter, answered. He said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (16:16) Jesus answered, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this

to you, but my Father in heaven.” (16:17)

Simon Peter was not confused by the world in this moment of confession. He answered quickly and without reservation. It was a moment of clarity. This moment of worship with the disciples led Jesus to reveal that he is not talking about flesh and blood, but he is talking about the spirit. Jesus went on to say, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” (Matt.16:18)

On this rock of truly knowing who Jesus is through the Holy Spirit is what true worship is built on. The church is built on true worship. True worship isn't just the Sunday morning worship experience. It is the living of your life. It is dedicating yourself 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is acknowledging relationship in the spirit with God.

Another thing that stops us is praise masquerading as true worship. Today, young people are mesmerized by loud music, frantic lyrics, blaring musical instruments, and clapping hands. Without knowledge of who God really is, praise becomes entertainment which is not true worship experience. Yes, some praise focused and directed toward God is part of our worship experience, but praise is coming into the presence of the Lord with joy and thanksgiving. It is not to entertain us. Worship is given to God. We praise him in the sanctuary with our hand claps, with our words of thanksgiving, with psalms and sometimes our emotions, but worship is us pouring out our lives willingly and becoming a living sacrifice. Worship is not to appease our selfish desire to be entertained or to make us blindly emotional.

“Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Matt.16:24)

Being a true worshipper is a process. Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the

renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

We are saved by grace through our faith, but we cannot have faith if we do not have a relationship with God, and we cannot have a relationship without entering into true worship with God. If we don't acknowledge God openly and truthfully in our lives every day of the week 24 hours a day, we will continue to have one foot in the kingdom of God and another in the world. There is no way anyone can continue this type of confusion in life. A person will end up loving the world and hating God or loving the kingdom of God and hating the world. The choice is ours ultimately, and it becomes a daily battle for everyone seeking a true relationship with God.

It is difficult to leave the “have it your way world” of excess; confusion; and greed. What happens when that life brings you to your knees in catastrophic human events? Who will you call on for help? Excess doesn't answer the poor. Confusion doesn't give understanding. And, greed turns its back on poverty. So, to discern God's will in your life, becomes a lot easier when you come to the end of yourself and you have nowhere else to go. God is there always waiting for a relationship; but God never becomes more tangible until the world lets us down and we see the world clearly. When we turn away from this material world, we turn to the spirit of God that has been there since the beginning of time. We start building a new world in the Spirit and relationship of our Creator God. We truly start giving ourselves as true worshippers, as people truly dedicated to God's will in our individual lives and the world.

Remember, Sunday mornings isn't all there is to worship. But it is a wonderful beginning that opens the door to the beloved kingdom of God. When faith becomes an action word in your life, it leads us to understand that the work of God moves through the Spirit to our hands, to feed the hungry, to help the homeless, cloth the needy. Then, true worship doesn't end when you leave Sunday worship at First Church.

True worship is dedicating your life to God; acknowledging your relationship with God and being led by the spirit to worship the one true God through the living of our lives.

Gandhi says that everything we do in life is insignificant, but it is important that we do it because no one else will. I believe that although going to worship may seem insignificant, it is important to go anyway because no one else can build your relationship with God for you but you. May God continue to bless you always.

Let us pray: Spirit of the living God, fill your people and infuse them with a passion for you and for your kingdom. Give us wisdom to discern your will, boldness to confront the confusion in the world, and a passion and energy to inspire all of us to become true worshippers. Amen.

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