

March 3, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Worship Zealously!

If I were retired ... Sunday would still be the highlight of my week and Easter the highlight of my year. Before each Sunday, I would read through the Scripture lessons; seeing how they connect and looking up anything I did not understand. I would read or sing through the hymns; seeing how they fit with the readings and looking up any words I did not understand. I would write out my offering check with a prayer of thanks. I would get to bed early to make sure I was well rested and alert in the morning. I would arrive at church 20 minutes before the service. By 15 minutes before the service, I would be seated in a pew near the front. I would stare at the altar and cross and meditate and pray. I would read through the Christian Questions on pages 295-296 of the hymnal to prepare my heart for Holy Communion. If a member sat near me, I would politely but quietly greet them. If someone I did not know sat near me, I would whisper a greeting, introduce myself and ask who they are. I would ask them to sign the attendance register and invite them to ask me any questions they might have during the service. During the service, I would close my eyes during the lessons and sermon and other parts that I have memorized. I would close my eyes so that nothing would distract me and I could stay completely focused on the words. Afterwards, I would smile as I would think of that hymn phrase which says, "I have walked with God today."

If I were a Jew living at the time of Jesus, the Sabbath would be the highlight of my week and Passover the highlight of my year. I would leave early on my trip to Jerusalem so I would be there in plenty of time to purchase my lamb on the 10th of the month as God directed. For the next few days, I would go to the temple to listen to different rabbis teach. I would listen to the choirs singing the psalms. I would think of all that the Lord had done for our nation and for me as an individual as I prayed. On the 14th of the month, the Passover, I would take my lamb to the temple. Instead of complaining about the long line, I would stare in awe as lamb after lamb was slaughtered. There was an average of 250,000 lambs slaughtered each Passover. Each one was a reminder that sin causes death and that one day the Messiah would come who would take away the sin of the world. When it was my turn, I would take the knife the priest handed to me and slit the throat of my lamb. I would feel it limply fall as the priest caught the gushing blood in a bowl. Then he would hand the bowl of blood to another priest who tossed it on the huge fire of the altar and I would hear a short sizzle. Another priest would take my lifeless lamb and flay it, remove its innards along with most of the fat which was then salted and put on the altar. The smell of warm blood and burning entrails would almost make me sick to my stomach. Then, I would carry the lamb, dripping with blood, to where I was staying with my family as we would sing Psalms 115-118 and prepare for the Passover feast.

That's what worship was supposed to be like 2000 years ago in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, worship turned into some sort of tradition of going through the motions, like putting up the Christmas tree while muttering, "Bah. Humbug." Most Jews entirely forgot the spiritual truths that God was teaching them with the Passover regulations. It was even harder to focus on the truths of salvation while people nearby were arguing and yelling about prices as they sold animals for the sacrifices and exchanged money for the Temple Tax. It would be like trying to worship sincerely in downtown Port Washington during Fish Day, or at the Wisconsin State Fair. And the Jewish leaders, who should have been doing everything they could to help people worship sincerely, made the matter worse by turning the whole thing into a greedy money-making opportunity. As Jesus properly pointed out (Mt 15:8), "**[You] people honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me.**" No wonder Jesus was angry. Since the Jewish leaders weren't doing their job, Jesus did it for them. He grabbed some ropes that he used as whips to chase the vendors and animals out of the temple courtyard. It's an overlooked miracle that the Jewish leaders did not attack and kill Jesus.

If I were retired... Sunday would still be the highlight of my week, but that ideal plan of worship for Sunday morning I described does not exist. No one is able to be so perfectly focused and devoted to the Lord that their mind never wanders during worship. We should strive for it, but the reality is that we think about other things and what people think of us and we lose our focus on God. Even as a worship leader now, my mind goes in all sorts of crazy directions instead of being totally focused on the words of each hymn, psalm, sermon and prayer. I've been thinking about this all week long as I prepared the sermon and my mind still jumps all over the place thinking about what some people said to me or did or did not do, and on and on. I could expect Jesus to swing a whip at me.

We do not have vendors in our sanctuary trying to sell us things as we worship, but the devil still uses all sorts of things to distract us from true worship. What distractions would Jesus drive out if he were here today? At our last pastors' conference, every pastor agreed that sports – both youth and professional – has become one of, if not the largest, idol in our culture. I'm also guessing that Jesus would disable all televisions and shut down the internet every Sunday morning. Even good and healthy things, like hobbies and exercise and time together with loved ones can become idols when they become more important to us than time with Jesus. Then there's also our lazy nature which just does not want to get up and get going. King David exclaimed (Ps 122:1), "**I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'**" Can you and I honestly say the same thing? Or is it more like, "I guess I should probably go so pastor stops nagging me." Or, "I'm eager to go to church so I can see my friends and talk about our plans." Would Jesus have thrown us out of the temple if we were there that morning? I sometimes wonder.

Yes, Jesus was angry at those greedy vendors and Jewish leaders, but what was it that prompted his anger? Why did he drive them out of the temple courtyard? It was love. Love for his people. Love for you. Have you ever seen a Mama Bear guarding her cubs? She'll fight anyone. That's passion. That's heart. That's zeal. Jesus' disciples saw his zeal for your salvation on display as he cleared the courtyard, just as David predicted the Messiah would do in Psalm 69. Jesus loved you and me too much to let us get pulled away from him and dragged into hell. His zeal for your soul led him to speak the truth and stand up to those who were wrong and hurting people. His zeal for your soul led him to make sure he was in the Garden of Gethsemane where Judas would find him and he would be arrested. It was zeal for your soul which led him to stand quietly as he faced a joke of a judge and jury and was condemned to death. It was zeal for your soul which led him to endure being on the other end of a whip as his back was shredded. It was zeal for your soul which led him to hold still as they pounded spikes through his skin and lifted him up for everyone to see and laugh at him. It was zeal for your soul which kept him on the cross as each breath drained his strength and increased his pain. It was zeal for your soul which led him to endure everything until it was finished, until your sins were forgiven and your price to paradise was paid.

The Jewish leaders challenged Jesus (:18), "**What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?**" In other words, "Who put you in charge?" Jesus replied (:19), "**Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.**" What a profound statement! The word that Jesus used for "temple," was often used to refer to the entire temple complex. But it's precise meaning was not just the temple building, but the Holy of Holies, the inner room of the temple where the Ark of the Covenant was placed and where God said he would dwell here on earth. Jesus was referring to God on earth when he said "temple." Jesus was God in flesh and so his body was the "temple." I like to think that he even pointed to himself as he said, "**Destroy THIS temple, and I will raise it again in three days.**"

It is not surprising that the Jewish leaders, who only cared about earthly things, would only think of the earthly temple. At the time of Jesus, they had been working on rebuilding the temple for 46 years and it still wasn't completed. They scoffed at Jesus' claim to rebuild the temple in just 3 days. Notice, though, Jesus did not say he would "rebuild" the temple. He said he would "**RAISE IT AGAIN in three days.**" Obviously, he was referring to his own body. After dying to forgive the sins of the world, Jesus would rise again on the third day to prove that he is true God and that there is life after death through him. By what authority did Jesus cleanse the temple courtyard? By his own! Duh! He is God!

I was shocked to read that a recent Gallup pole found that only 29% of people in Wisconsin go to church on Sunday and 46% said that they would never even think of attending church on any weekend. Yikes! Our hearts break for those people who stay away from church. They are missing out on so much. How

tragic. By God's grace, we know that we need what Jesus is offering us in worship. We need to hear of his love, his forgiveness, his life eternal.

In this world, we face troubles. Jesus said (John 16:33), "**Take heart! I have overcome the world.**" In this world, we suffer sorrow and sadness. Jesus says that we will one day turn our tears to cheers. In this world, we are often confused. God said (Ps 32:8), "**I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.**" In this world, our conscience often nags us. Jesus said (Mt 9:2), "**Be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven.**" In this world, many ignore us and take advantage of us leaving us feeling unloved and lonely. Jesus said (Mt 28:20), "**Surely, I am with you always.**" And (Jer 31:33), "**I have loved you with an everlasting love.**" In this world, there are times when we do not know how we can afford things. Jesus promises to provide us daily bread. In this world, there is a lot of chaos and stress. Jesus said (Jn 14:27), "**Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you.**" In this world, we face death. Jesus said (Jn 14:19), "**Because I live, you also will live.**"

No one needs to tell us, or urge us, or warn us to worship. Our hearts are ready to explode with joy and thanksgiving. The average price for a seat at last month's Super Bowl was \$8,600. We would pay that and ten times more to receive the good news of salvation through Word and Sacrament. But you do not have to pay a penny. It's free. Jesus already paid for it completely. With eagerness we come to worship. Our worship is one of the ways we show God how much he is worth to us. Worship is not entertainment, or putting a catchy tune in your head for the rest of the day. This sanctuary is a factory of the Holy Spirit where he works on our hearts. The font reminds us of our baptism where God adopted us as his own and gave us faith. The altar with no blood on it reminds us that Jesus already shed all the blood necessary for our forgiveness. The ambo reminds us of God's perfect and powerful Word. The candles remind us of Jesus, the Light of the World. The banners remind us what Jesus did for us and on and on and on I could go. The blessings are too many to count. Can you and I honestly say, along with King David, (Ps 122:1), "**I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'**"? By God's grace we can. And we will worship zealously. Amen.