



Great Ends of the Church #3

The Maintenance of Divine Worship

Romans 12:1-2

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April 25, 2010

My little home town of Old Forge, New York, is a resort town. That means that the livelihood of the community depends on the people who come there to play and spend their money.

When I was a kid, our church – the only Protestant church in town – decided to have a special, early service on Sundays in the summer tourist season for those who had to be at work serving those tourists on Sunday mornings...and for those who had other summery things to do, like play tennis or golf, for instance.

Now, I wasn't there on this particular Sunday, but I do have multiple witnesses to these events: It was the early service, supposed to be half an hour, starting at six-thirty. Chuck, the father of one of my classmates and the main insurance/real estate person in town – and an avid golfer – was in attendance. Jim Ulrich, the pastor, apparently got hold of a particularly juicy theological bone in his sermon, and was giving it a good chewing.

Chuck, meanwhile, got increasingly anxious, fidgeting, turning around, looking at his watch, rustling his hymnal, that sort of thing. Some began to wonder if the topic of Jim's sermon was working on Chuck's conscience.

Finally, after a few minutes of this, Chuck stood up and blurted, "Jeepers Creepers!" Well, he didn't exactly say that, but it was something very similar that usually isn't said that way in church. "Jeepers Creepers, Reverend, I've got a tee time!"

At least he was in church. If we had a dollar for every time John, Diane, or I has heard "I don't have to be in church to worship God; why, the most beautiful chapel I know is right out in God's creation on the seventh green!" well, we could double our mission budget.

But there is some truth – a glimmer, but some -- truth in that excuse. By "church," most people mean the building, and by going to church, they mean worship.

And worship is our natural human response to God's handiwork. Who hasn't been captured by a sunset or a tiny infant's perfect toes, by the stars or the mountains, or by the

enthusiasm of a group of really happy people being happy? That feeling puts us in mind of God, and that leads to the beginnings of worship. So, yes, you very well *could* worship on the seventh green. But it wouldn't be *church*, and not just because it isn't in one.

We've all felt some sort of emotional tug when we've encountered something of God. That *feeling*, by itself, is not worship, though. Most of the time, most of us don't feel like that, and worship really doesn't depend on how we're feeling, any more than how we feel when we say the Pledge of Allegiance makes any difference whether we've pledged or not. Worship is, first and foremost, about God: our response to God's existence. That response can be emotional; it can be intellectual or even spiritual. The dictionary says that "worship is the adoration, devotion, and respect given to a deity, or the rites or services through which people show their adoration, devotion, and respect for a deity."

That *feeling* about God can be directed anywhere; it doesn't have to be the God we worship as Christians. It could just as well be, as the dictionary says, a "deity." Christian worship grows out of our *understanding* of God, which we get from the Bible and the history of God's relations with people. That's "the rites or services through which people show their adoration" part. I show my allegiance by saying the Pledge, whether or not at that moment I'm feeling particularly "allegic."

The thing is, different people look at the Bible and God's relations with people and come up with very different conclusions. What some Christians consider worship doesn't always look like worship to us, and the feeling can be mutual. The Chaplain Commandant of the Navy Chaplains' School when I was there came from a very conservative group, who were very strict about who was and who wasn't one of them. Their rules meant that he couldn't call our daily chapel service "worship," because it wasn't led by a member of his denomination, so instead we met for daily "spiritual opportunities" – which, quite honestly, looked very much like worship to most of us.

An Orthodox service, where the people all stand around for two hours or more, probably wouldn't *feel* right to us, either – or even a hard rock youth service, where our ears would hurt too much to feel very uplifted. But I also think that we could respect that others believe that they are worshipping, according to their understanding of the Bible and God's acts among them – and I expect that God does, too.

Whatever it may look like now, all Christian worship hearkens back to the picture we are given in the second chapter of the book of Acts (42, 46-47). Their worship is dynamic, it's compelling: the believers meet together every day to pray, to hear more about God and Jesus, and to share with each other. Reading about them, it seems like a magnetic force kept pulling them back together to pray and praise God. And their time together reinforced them, built them up, empowered them to go back out and spread the new faith.

I was a part of a born-again revival in the 70's, and I well remember the pull that fellowship had on us: we just wanted to be together, praising God. We sought each other out in the school hallways, met every night.

This is an essential part of the Church's worship. *Being together* is a hallmark of Christianity. Jesus said, "Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I am there with them." Believers long to be with other believers, and the reason we feel this longing is God, who calls us to be the Church.

What helps make sense out of this is to remember that the capital "C" Church is not a building, it is people. What we usually call the church is just the building the Church meets in. The Church is, as Paul puts it, "The Body of Christ," a whole made up of all us individuals brought together in Jesus Christ.

The Church, capital "C", is about God. The Church exists because God called it into being, and the first response of the Church, gathered together, is to worship God. We thank God for bringing us together, for all God has given us. We take time out of our lives, time God gave us, and give it back in gratitude and praise.

At least, that's how it ought to be. It's easy, though, for worship to become something that's done to me, to lift me up, rather than something I do with other people. There's a fine line between something I'm a part of, and something I partake of. That's a problem, because worship, when we partake of it, has become something for *me*, to please *me*. What happened to God? Sounds like going to the theater.

The Danish theologian Kierkegaard thought of worship as a theater, too. But with a slight difference: in this theater, we, up front, are the prompters – we have the script, the Bible and the order of worship; you, the congregation, are the performers – who take the script and bring it to life; and it is God himself who is the audience. We do all this for God.

Presbyterians are known for thinking about things, ordering them, setting them down in rules. And we've got plenty of rules about how a worship service – or a service of worship: how we serve God through something called worship – ought to be done.

Our worship centers on God, as we understand God first and foremost in Scripture. Our whole service is built around God's revelation in the Bible. When we plan the service, that's where we start. The pastors, the musicians, all of us do our part, to bring together a service of worship.

Then we hand it over to you, and to God. Each of you brings a piece of yourself, your experience, your life, your encounter with God, and that adds even more, and when they're all brought together, it multiplies. And through the Holy Spirit's action, all sorts of things happen.

The preacher may, for example, be talking about shoes, and everyone hears that; but that may make you think about feet, and that's what you needed to hear about, and someone else may be thinking of people who have no shoes... so it goes: when you bring things to God, God changes them. When you bring yourself, God changes you, too.

The Directory for Worship, a part of our Book of Order, our book of rules, talks about worship as a cycle: we come together to worship, praise, and learn, all of which gives us

fuel to go back out into life and be God's people. Living the life God gives us pulls us back into the fellowship and worship of the Church, and the cycle repeats itself. "From a Christian's life in the world comes the need for worship; in worship one sees the world in light of God's grace; from worship come vision and power for living in the world...the rhythm of the life of the believer moves from worship to ministry, from ministry to worship." (W-5.1002-3)

So worship together is the table at which we're fed – the Body of Christ is fed, the stream at which our thirst is quenched, the place where we find rest – and the place where we're challenged to keep on growing. You can see the difference between the Chapel of the 7th Green and the Church's worship.

What are your memories of worship? I remember rubbing my face in my mother's fur coat; learning how to read the words to a hymn; looking at the Honor Roll of those members who served in our country's wars and wondering who they were.

I remember freezing cold stone cathedrals in Great Britain, lonely hillsides in Korea, Easter sunrise on the wing of the bridge of a Navy ship in the South Pacific. I remember weddings in parks and memorials with empty boots and helmets. I remember auditoriums and gymnasiums, people speaking in Portuguese, Korean, Japanese, Tagalog, Spanish, Greek. I remember pain and joy and awe and feelings I can't describe – and not feeling.

Our worship isn't confined to this sanctuary, or even this building. Our worship together is shared in extended communion, in worship led by members of this body in care centers all around us. Our local part of the Body of Christ isn't just here, now; in our work and in our prayers, we carry God and Christ everywhere we go. Even the 7th Green, with the rest of your foursome, prayer, and maybe a Bible.

The first question and answer some of you learned as you studied to be confirmed in a church was this: What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. That's worship.

Sometimes we come to church in search of something. We hope for a word of encouragement, a word of healing, some support. Or we come because our faith is bubbling over, and we have to celebrate that faith. We come because we're feeling empty, and need faith and fellowship. We come to be supported by others, or to be a support—and, then, in another week or two, when things have shifted, we trade roles.

But we always come to God. And God always waits for us – and gathers us together as the Body of Christ, all of us, pieces brought together into one mystical whole.