

The Way We Worship

Week 6

We have held off for 6 weeks (out of a 7 week series) to discuss music. Unfortunately, we are living in a time when Christians tend to equate “worship” with music. So much so, there even exists a term (Worship Wars) to describe the sharp disagreements/disputes that can rage within congregations over the music style utilized in worship services. This is a sad state of affairs on many levels...

1. It demonstrates a very narrow understanding of worship (which is what we are attempting to counter in this series).
2. It demonstrates immaturity to fight over such things.
3. It highlights how much consumerism (or the idolatry of Self) has made its way into congregations.

While music is a wonderful tool to employ in service of worship, it should not be equated to worship. We can worship with or without music. Music is not what determines if worship is happening or not.

Now don't get me wrong. I love music. Music is very powerful. It's powerful because it can touch us in a deep way. Music can, often does, move us. It reaches places in us emotionally that we usually keep well guarded; it can also conjure up memories, and all the corresponding feelings that go with those memories, like few things can.

But if we're not careful we can confuse the movement we experience through music as movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. (That's not to say that the Spirit can't use music...just saying that we need to discern the difference.) Additionally, we need to be careful not to confuse our relationship with music and our relationship with God. Music can have a powerful and beautiful place in our lives and in our relationship with God. We just need to keep this sobering truth in mind: there is not a single gift God has given us that we haven't managed to twist, tarnish, or corrupt. That being the case, we need to be clear-headed in how we use music. This isn't because there is something inherently wrong with music. Quite the contrary, music is a beautiful, wonderful gift from God. But, again, like all gifts, we have managed to distort it. The sheer fact that Christians divide over music proves the point. But to be clear, it's not a music problem, it's a heart problem.

- *What is your favorite type of music? (If you could only listen to one type of music for the rest of your life, what type of music would it be? Or, what type/style of music would you consider your “heart language”?)*
- *How important is music, in general, to you? Why do you think that is? How important is music, as it pertains to worship, to you? Why is that?*

- *Why do you think people have such sharp disagreement over music within congregations?*
- *How do you think the type and style of music that is used within a worship service should be determined?*

To build upon our foundational point in this series (from Week 1: Worship is about God, not about us), how should we think about music within a congregational worship context? I'm not sure that there is one right answer to this question, but perhaps some guiding principles. Questions we might want to consider are...

- Does God care about the type/style of music we use? (Probably not to the level we do).
- What does God care about as it pertains to us worshipping Him? (Honesty; sincerity; authenticity; unity; accurately reflecting His care and concerns)
- How is Love—love of God and love of each other—being expressed/lived out in our worship service?

Nothing within our worship should divide us. So when we experience something that does divide us, or is dividing us, we need to hit pause and consider what is going on. Why is something that should unite us dividing us? (To be clear, music is not the only element that has the potential for people to divide over.) Division, or any sort of infighting, as well as grumbling and complaining are symptoms of a lack of love and maturity. (Please keep in mind that worship is an expression of love; and a goal is to always be maturing, growing, developing into Christlikeness.)

Let's use the concept of growing, maturing, developing as an illustration. Imagine a family. A newborn is brought into the family. Obviously the baby is "immature"...it really can't do anything for itself, it doesn't "contribute" in any objective way. In fact, it can be rather demanding. But we expect this considering the stage of life that the baby is in. Fast-forward 10-15 years, and there's certain developmental markers or milestones we would expect this young person to have reached. If they haven't reached those markers/milestones we would probably, and rightly, be concerned. We'd want to know what is preventing this child from developing properly. Fast forward another 10-15 years, and at this stage in normal, healthy development we'd expect this person to be able to fend for themselves, be a contributing member of society, perhaps even be starting a family of their own. This is the typical/expected "growth pattern". Obviously there are exceptions to this—some due to congenital issues; some due to an interruption in the developmental process; some "failure to thrive" factors; etc.

Physically/biologically healthy development will only occur if the circumstances are right. Generally speaking, the majority of people experience circumstances that are at least "right enough" for us to expect certain markers/milestones...or at least to be within a range of healthy development.

Now, let's see if we can transfer this to spiritual development. Are there markers/milestones that we can predictably expect? Are there known factors that contribute to thriving, or lack thereof? Is there a range of healthy maturation, with anything falling out of that range being a sign to pay

attention to? What are the signs that someone isn't maturing as hoped/expected? Are we even as attentive to healthy spiritual development as we are to physical (or mental) development? Hmm, this is a bit more challenging isn't it?

- *How would you differentiate a healthy, mature, thriving Christian from an unhealthy, immature, struggling one? What factors contribute to healthy growth/development/maturity of a Christian (and a Christian community)?*

What is becoming increasingly evident in congregations across the country is a lack of healthy discipleship. Whenever/wherever we see division and disgruntledness over elements of worship, that's a sure sign that something is off. (To be sure, division and disgruntledness over any area/aspect of congregational life is an unhealthy sign.)

We must ALWAYS keep in mind that the Church is NOT a provider of religious goods and services seeking to please the "Christian" consumer. Rather, the Church is the people who acknowledge and proclaim the reign of our risen King through the offering of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness...this is Worship.

So, then, what is the role of music? Well, prayers can be offered musically (songs are often prayers). The Gospel can be proclaimed in song. Gifts of musical abilities (vocally or instrumentally) can be shared. Music can play a beautiful and powerful role in worship. We have scriptural evidence of music used for worship in the early Church...

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." (Colossians 3:16); *"...be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord..."* (Ephesians 5:18-19) And let us not forget Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi after being flogged, *"...praying and singing hymns."* (Acts 16:25) And, yet, music is not an essential, or mandatory, part of worship...and certainly NOT something worth fighting over or separating over.

- *What elements within corporate worship do people have a tendency to divide over? Why do you think that is?*
- *As an exercise, design a worship service. What elements would you include? (And why?) In what order would you put those elements? (And why?) How much time would you allow for each element? Who would you have facilitate each element? When and where would you have this worship service? (We did a somewhat similar exercise at the last Big Ask Dinner, in case this sounds a bit familiar.)*

Before we turn our attention to other elements of worship, I think it is helpful to understand WHY music tends to be an element that can spark so much contention. We've already noted that music can touch us on an emotional level like few things can. So that's one dimension of this topic. But on a practical level, music is also one of the "Big Three" elements that tend to get highlighted/displayed/showcased during a worship service, with preaching/teaching and the

Lord's Supper being the other two. And make no mistake, people can have big opinions/feelings about those as well. Anytime something gets as much focus and attention as the Big Three do, there's bound to be strong feelings and opinions about it because we form a certain attachment to them. But here's some questions for us to consider...

- *Why are the "Big Three" the Big Three? Why do they tend to get such a prominent role in a worship service?*
- *Is it possible that we've just become so accustomed to leaning on those elements that we've neglected other elements? Is it possible that we don't utilize or experiment with other elements due to a lack of creativity/imagination, or laziness, or fear of how people will respond? What other elements could we use that would/could be God-honoring as well as formative for us?*
- *What is your margin of tolerance for how much you would be willing to flex and try out other forms, expressions, elements, styles of worship at CUMC? Or, which of the following best describes your attitude towards change within our worship services...*
 - *Don't you dare tamper with the worship service.*
 - *If it ain't broke, don't fix it.*
 - *I don't mind a little creativity, change of pace, or experimenting from time to time (as long as it stays from time to time).*
 - *Why not? Let's give it a whirl...*
 - *Yes, please...it's about time.*
 - *Other: describe/articulate your attitude in your own words...*

Let's go back to the parallel of a family, and the development of an individual within a family, and consider this: Within a family system, who accommodates whom? Who flexes and adjusts the most in order to create a flourishing environment? I'll take it a step further, whose responsibility is it to see to the health and thriving of the family? The correct answer, of course, is the adults, the (theoretically/ideally) more mature ones. The older/mature ones care for and raise the younger/immature ones. It is the older, wiser, more mature ones who teach the younger the realities of life and how to navigate life. And, of course, they need to lead by example in this. As it is in a family of origin, so it is in a spiritual family.

- *What do you think our younger members at CUMC are learning from our older members, especially as it pertains to worship? (Or, consider the previous question about attitude towards change...what is your attitude communicating to the younger generation?)*
- *How have you flexed/adjusted, or loosened your grip on your preferences related to worship in order to accommodate others (especially the younger generation and/or the unchurched)?*

Earlier we discussed markers of maturity vs immaturity. To demand our own way/preferences, or to become pouty, sullen, sulky, or resentful about not getting things our way is generally a mark of immaturity. Being willing to accommodate others is typically a mark of maturity.

Part of our challenge with this whole topic/conversation is that we have made the Sunday worship service THE distinctive mark of the Church. Or to say it another way, we tend to equate the worship service with what it means to BE the Church. And while worship is a key function of the Church, all the elements and expressions of worship that occur during a service, and even a worship service itself, is just a form. It doesn't define us. WHO we worship defines us. HOW we worship is flexible. (See Week 2 for more re: form follows function.)

Generally speaking, with maturity comes more flexibility. Why? Because the chief mark of maturity is Love. The apostle Paul puts it this way, "*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*" (I Corinthians 13:4-7, emphasis added)

Soul Training Exercise ~ Lectio Divina ~ Psalm 145

Latin for Divine Reading. The desire is to encounter and surrender to the Living God by attending to Scripture. Lectio requires a humble, listening posture that is alert to the voice of God in Scripture.

Lectio

First read the text (lectio). You give it a slow, focused and naive reading of the passage.

Meditatio

Then re-read the same passage paying attention to what word or phrase stands out.

Oratio

Third, offer a simple prayer in response to God.

Contemplatio

After prayer, the text is read for the third time with the focus on listening for the Voice of God (contemplatio). This is a gift of grace and cannot be forced. Here is where you are hoping to interact with God, listening for His voice. You can ask the question, "*Lord, what do you want to do inside me?*"

Actio

Finally consider your response to God's Word and grace (actio). How can you make your life a gift to others in response to the Word?