



“Good Worship”

Amos 5:21-24

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It was as heated an argument as I have ever experienced at church. Voices weren't raised (we were, after all, in a Presbyterian church) but there was plenty of energy and tension in the room. No one stepped back from their position. You may be wondering what controversial issue was the focus of our discussion. Gun control? Immigration? No, we were talking about the color of the pew cushions in the sanctuary. I'm not making this up. This was many years ago. I was filling in for the regular pastor for the summer, and I was so taken aback at this discussion that I didn't even try to moderate the conversation. If memory serves me there were two colors in contention – a neutral shade that complimented the wood of the pews and a blue green shade that echoed the stain glass windows.

I didn't have an opinion about this particular worship fight. But I do have strong opinions about other things. My list of worship dos and don'ts is fairly long. Let me share with you some of my worship pet peeves.

I don't like over-explained worship. I see no need for lengthy introductions to the various elements of the service. Let's just do it.

I don't like worship leaders with stained glass voices. You know what I'm talking about. They use a voice that isn't their regular voice when they speak in worship. “A blessed welcome to you this blessed morning.” I don't like that.

I bet we could easily fill up the next thirty minutes sharing with one another what we like and dislike in worship. Most of us have strong opinions about these things. Over the years, I have heard:

- It's good worship only if communion is offered.
- It's good worship if the sermon isn't too long.
- It's good worship only if the ministers wear robes.
- It's good worship only if the ministers do not wear robes.
- It's good worship as long as we sing music that is... well... fill in the blank on that one because most of us have deeply held preferences about music in church.

We all have our list of worship dos and don'ts.

When was the last time we asked: How does God want us to worship? Surely God has opinions about this very important topic.

Think back to the exodus. The story of the exodus is all about the people of God being freed from slavery. But that's actually not the wording in the Bible. The story speaks not of freedom from slavery but freedom to worship. It's all about worship. When Moses confronts Pharaoh on behalf of his people, he says:

Let us go so we can worship our God.

Ten plagues and much pain and suffering later Pharaoh gives in to this demand.

At last, the people are free to worship. But how? If they ever knew, they have long forgotten. God takes Moses up on the mountain while the people await further instruction. God reminds Moses that the people have been brought out of Egypt so that they might worship.

Moses responds (and here I am straying just a bit from the text.)

Yes, yes, that's what I want to talk to you about. How are we supposed to do that? Two hymns or three? Should the announcements come before the service or in the middle? Do you prefer the King James or the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible?

God replies in that booming God voice:

You know what I like? You know what I like? You shall have no other gods but me. That's what I like. You shall not dishonor the name of the Lord your God. You shall remember the Lord's Day and keep it holy. THAT'S WHAT I LIKE IN WORSHIP.
Oh, and let me share with you my list of worship don'ts.... Don't kill other people – don't steal or lie – don't be thinking about what your neighbor has.¹

When God is pressed about how we should worship, God responds by giving us the Ten Commandments; God responds by telling us how to live good and faithful lives, how to live together in ways that are healthy and sustainable.

And then there is the prophet, Amos. According to Amos, God doesn't have much patience for the worship of Israel.

I hate, I despise your feasts and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

I happen to love the sound of the harp in worship. Really love it. I find it soothing and inspiring. So, God, what are you doing picking on harps and the people who play them?

¹ This section is indebted to William Willimon, **Preaching to Strangers** (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 91-97.

I don't think God has a problem with harps and the people who play them. God has bigger fish to fry. God is unhappy with Israel. In the time of the prophet Amos, there is a great gap between the rich and the poor and those in power have little regard for the welfare of the less fortunate. The very people Amos identifies as the primary culprits can be found in temple every week displaying their piety for all to see. It is no wonder that Amos concludes his diatribe against such worship with the words:

Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Such magnificent words make my list of worship dos and don'ts seem...well... trivial.

We can dress up in our finest and put on a good show on Sunday morning, but if we then get up on Monday morning and ignore God's commandments or participate in injustice then we offend God. Put in a positive way, God would like to see a deep connection between what we say in here and what we do out there.

So, what is good worship? In seminary I was taught that good worship includes a well-crafted sermon, carefully chosen hymns, an atmosphere of dignity and restrained joy. According to Amos, worship is thought of as good by God because of what it enables us to do out in the world.

It is good worship if it helps us get through another week in this crazy messed up world. It is good worship if it helps us access reservoirs of compassion. It is good worship if it challenges us to think more deeply about what justice and equity look like in our community.

But I don't want to take this too far. I don't want to imply that worship doesn't matter. Because it does. Worship is not a distraction from the work of creating a more just world. In fact, the two go hand in hand. Gathering together as a body matters. It matters so very, very much.

I'm going to take a little detour here and talk about the World Cup that came to conclusion a week ago. If you didn't follow it, that's OK. But just know that you are in the minority on planet earth. It's difficult to quantify how many people engage with the tournament but it may be as high as 6 billion. Yes, that is 6 billion people, which is 3/4ths of the world's population.

Why is the World Cup so popular? Because soccer is so popular throughout the world. Because no matter how inept and compromised the governing body FIFA is, they can't ruin a tournament that belongs to those 6 billion humans.

It's tempting to see such mass events as distractions from what really matters, sideshows that keep us from noticing and addressing injustice and inequality.

People watching the World Cup throughout the world haven't forgotten their circumstances. They know exactly what is broken in their world., And they watch. And cheer. And feel a sense of belonging. And belonging is lode bearing for our sense of well-being. Sociologists recognize that humans need collective ritual. They call it collective effervescence – when individual identity dissolves into collective identity.²

² <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DawVV9dNpfe/> I am indebted to the insights shared in this short video.

That makes me think about Norway's World Cup team and their fans literally rowing together in the same direction. I recall the gusto with which the Scots sang their national anthem. I literally didn't know a national anthem could get that loud. I think back on the improbable run of Cape Verde, this tiny West African nation that qualified for the World Cup and made it to the knockout round. (take down) The tournament provided so much joy to so many.

Joy and awareness of inequality and injustice are not in competition.

The immigrants in the United States who built the soccer culture and have been watching every World Cup in living rooms and neighborhood bars for the past 30 years know exactly what it costs to live in a country that has never fully made room for them. They watch the World Cup and remember what it feels like to belong, to be in the same space as people who are experiencing the same thing. It's powerful and grounding.

Kind of like worship. Every service of worship, we have an opportunity to remember who we are - people loved and claimed by God, people who belong to one another, people who belong to God. Every worship service, we have an opportunity to be sent out into the world with courage to fight for justice and mend that which is broken.

To that I can only say: GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAL!

Amen.

