



# The Heart of Worship

Vienna Presbyterian Church  
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James  
John 4:19-26

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I had a flashback this week. I recalled my one and only foray into acting. I tried out for a high school play on something of a lark. I was selected for the role of Professor Willard in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town*.

For the record, Professor Willard makes one brief appearance and then disappears, a perfect role for a novice like me.

The assignment of learning my lines was harder than I first imagined. Professor Willard's speech is a dense, historical description of Grover's Corners. I lost interest in it. Mrs. Sittig, our director, had the hardest time keeping me on task. She knew my mom and used to apprise her of my deficiencies in this area.

On opening night, my friends showed up en masse. I think they were secretly hoping to throw me off stride so I would forget my lines. I made it through the monologue just fine until right before the end. Suddenly, I drew a blank. I froze.

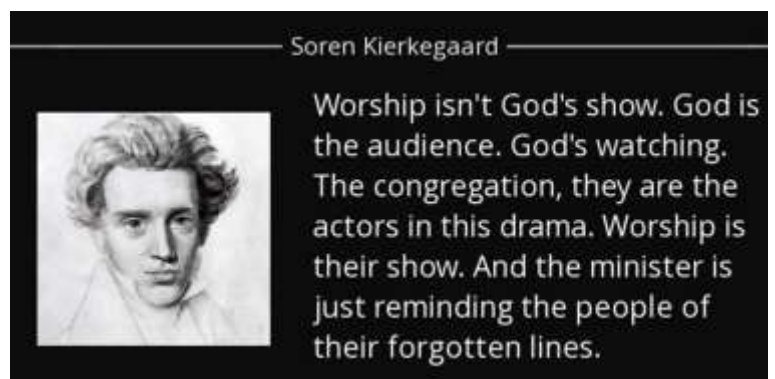
My saving grace was that Mrs. Sittig was seated in the first row serving as prompter. She was a safety net for any of us who forgot our lines. She mouthed the words with such force that her whisper could be heard throughout the auditorium. But she saved my bacon and I finished strong.

My friends, who cared little for decorum at a play, broke out into applause. And I, not knowing quite what to do, tipped my black stove top hat and took a bow.

I thought about my brief tenure in theater as I was preparing this sermon. There is a sense in which worship equates to theater. In the common parlance of our day, we

might liken worship leaders (preachers and musicians) to actors, God as the prompter and the congregation in the role of the audience.

A Danish philosopher-theologian, named Soren Kierkegaard, wrote an article in 1847 about the role of a congregation in worship. Kierkegaard was concerned about the deplorable state of the Danish State Church which fostered laziness among members and preachers alike. He challenged this notion of the preacher as the actor and the congregation as the audience. He claimed that the church had it all wrong. He said the congregation are the actors, worship leaders are the prompters and God is the audience.



There is the tendency, then as now, to regard worship as entertainment. Worship is evaluated largely in terms of what we get out of it.

Have you ever left worship and someone in your family asks the question, “So, what did you get out of worship?” or “What did you think of the sermon?” I would ask a different question. So, what did you bring to worship today?

We’re not merely religious consumers who evaluate the merits of a sermon or the quality of the music. We are participants in worship. It’s not a spectator sport.

Jesus talks about the heart of worship in our Scripture lesson from John 4. It’s part of an extended dialogue between Jesus and a woman from Samaria. There was bad blood between Jews and Samaritans back in the day. Samaritans were considered rogue Jews. They married

Gentiles and accepted only the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. More importantly, for our purposes, they worshipped at a rival shrine at Mt. Gerizim rather than the temple at Jerusalem.

Jesus lets it be known that this woman has been married five times and the man with whom she is currently living is not her husband. Notice how she attempts to steer the conversation away from her personal circumstances. In effect, she says, “As long as we’re talking about my five husbands, where do you stand on the issue of where people ought to worship?” Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place we must worship is Jerusalem” (4:20).



“Woman,” Jesus says, “believe me, the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (4:21). Jesus references this phrase, “The time is coming,” often in John’s gospel to refer to his impending death and resurrection. Early in Jesus’ ministry, he announces that “his time has not come” (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20). Yet, as Jesus nears his arrest and trial, he declares, “The time is coming for the Son of Man to be glorified” (12:23; 13:1; 17:1).

Jesus is inaugurating a whole new Messianic age that will be qualitatively different on matters of worship. Worship will no longer be tied to place. Jesus directs the question away from *where* they will worship to more essential questions like *how* and *who* they will worship.

Jesus announces, in verse 23, “The time is coming and has now come when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth.” Worship in the Messianic age will not be



limited to geography. True worshippers will worship in spirit and truth. Worship will not be limited to Mount Gerizim and the temple in Jerusalem.

The word “spirit” addresses the how question. Spirit refers to the human spirit or soul of a person. Worship originates on the inside (in the heart) and works its way out.

The word “truth” that is coupled with spirit addresses the who question. It reminds us that we don’t worship any old way we want. We worship God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as contained in Holy Scripture.

How we worship is contained in the word *spirit*. Worship originates in the heart. Who we worship is captured in the word truth. We worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as attested for us in Scripture.

This Samaritan woman doesn’t grasp what Jesus is saying. She says, “I know the Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us” (4:25). Jesus’ reply is one of the most explicit expressions of his divinity spoken anywhere in Scripture: “I, the one speaking to you—am he” (4:26).

Worship is an Old English word which literally translates “*worth*-ship. Worship ascribes worth to something. We worship God because God is of infinite value and worth. The angels in Revelation sing, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise (5:12).



Worship in the Bible is an active verb. It is not primarily done for us or to us, but by us. Worship is a joyous celebration of life lived in union with Christ and each other.

So what difference does this sermon on worship make in my life? Two things come to mind. The first is something of an attitude shift. The second leads to an action step you can take to ignite more passion for Christ.



First, an attitude shift. Worship is not something worship leaders do and the congregation evaluates. Worship is something we do together. Kierkegaard is spot on. We are actors; God is the audience.

Take music. Church is about the only place where people sing any more together in public, unless you count singing “Take me out to the ballgame” at Nationals Park. The debate over music is fierce in church circles. Some people favor contemporary Christian songs while others prefer time-honored, sacred hymns. I tire of the debate. I don’t really care if we sing hymns or contemporary worship songs. True worshippers worship in spirit and truth. Let’s stop evaluating worship and invest more energy into becoming active participants in worship.

My second suggestion begins with an appeal to make worship a higher priority in our lives. People attend Sunday worship less often in American society. It used to be that regular church attendance was three Sundays out of four. Now, the average is one or two Sundays a month. Even growing churches are experiencing decline in worship attendance because people are coming to worship less often. I’m asking you to arrange your life in such a way as to give greater priority to worship in the future.

Why am I making such a big deal out of worship if Jesus says we can worship God anywhere and anytime? Because Sunday worship is still the best way I know to commit to God and other believers. Sunday worship refocuses us, and it helps reset our priorities.

We talk about establishing a “rule of life” or a “spiritual growth plan” in our church. A spiritual growth plan provides greater intentionality and structure to our vision of Becoming Like Christ Together for the World. Four out of five Christians do not have a spiritual growth plan. Someone has said, “A goal without a plan is just a wish.”

Now, for my action step. Take a sheet of paper or the note-pad on your cell phone. Divide the page into thirds. Write “Becoming Like Christ” in the left column, “Together” in the middle column and “For the World” in the right column.



“Becoming like Christ” centers on the spiritual practices we’ve been talking about this summer—prayer, fasting, keeping Sabbath, solitude and confession. Pick out one or two practices to incorporate into your daily routine. For instance, pray 15 minutes daily. You can pray at home or incorporate into your daily commute. Read a chapter of the Bible daily. There are daily Bible reading plans online to assist you in this effort. Fast from social media or skip a meal to focus on your relationship with Christ.

In the middle column, marked “Together,” incorporate practices that will make it possible for you to associate with the body of Christ, the church. For example, engage in worship three times each month. Meet with a trusted believer

for coffee twice a month. Join a Bible study or small group this fall.

In the last column, marked “For the world,” identify somewhere where you can, in the words of our benediction, “Love the Lord and love the people, serve the Lord and serve the people.” Volunteer at one of our local missions. Practice more generosity by resolving to give \_\_\_ percent to the Lord’s work this fall. Build a relationship with someone in your neighborhood who does not know Christ.

Be realistic about your spiritual growth plan. It’s not so much an ideal toward which we are striving but the minimum standard that we don’t want to fall below.

Be creative. Don’t treat this exercise as a chore. This spiritual growth plan varies widely depending on personality and life stage.

Be accountable to someone. Share your growth plan with someone who knows you well, who can pray for you and hold you to it.

I’m asking you to devote the same intentionality that you give to a business plan at work or an exercise regimen at the gym. A goal without a plan is just a wish.

## Spiritual Growth Plan

### For the World

- Volunteer at local mission
- Practice generosity by giving \_\_\_%
- Build friendship with neighbor