

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:
PASSIONATE WORSHIP
Excellent churches have great worship.

Read lesson: Luke 11:1-13

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

Oxymorons are figures of speech that are inherently contradictory. Some are a part of everyday speech, like “clearly confused,” or “pretty ugly.” And some are related to our careers, like “sanitary landfill” or “working vacation.” Many oxymorons are political in nature like “government organization,” or “congressional action.” And some are religious: “holy war” and “minor miracle.”

If you ask some folks, they might tell you that “passionate worship” is an oxymoron. For some people, worship is anything but passionate. It’s a time to relax, or daydream, or even catch a few winks (you’d be surprised what I can see from up here). The truth is that worship done badly is deadly dull. But that’s not the way God wants it done, and that’s not the way excellent churches do it. Vibrant, fruitful, growing churches offer Passionate Worship that connects people to God and to one another. So as a part of our continuing 50th anniversary sermon series, I want to talk about our worship this morning.

Great worship is passionate worship. This week I experienced the PCUSA’s Youth Triennium with Sue as an Adult Ambassador. Jessica and Stephanie and Emily were their as youth Participants. There were 5,000 of us gathered at Purdue University, around the theme “For such a time as this” tying together the Esther story and Jesus’ baptism, and it was so powerful. We worshipped passionately everyday for 5 days. At a time when the wider church is mired down with debate and cutbacks and worries about the future, this week highlights what we are doing very, very well. We have caring, passionate, articulate kids in the PCUSA and adults who care very much about them. They are in touch with God or struggling with that. At our worship, the band was excellent.

The worship leaders, an all youth team led us in drama and liturgy. The preachers beginning with Pastor Bruce Reyes-Chow and ending with Tony Campolo were challenging and mesmerizing.

Every service had 5,000 young and old hearts joined together in song and laughter and hope and Jesus Christ. Many moments grabbed at my heart and spirit throughout the week, but let me share this one from worship: (count down)

Passionate worship has nothing to do with the style of worship. There is as much variety in passionate worship as there is in the people of God.

Passionate worship can be traditional, contemporary, liturgical, high, low, gospel, ethnic, you name it. It's not about the style.

Passionate worship is about the personal encounter of a church with the presence of the living God. It doesn't matter what vehicle takes you there as long as you arrive.

The Psalms are the worship book of the Bible, and passion for worship runs all through them. You can hear it in Psalm 63:

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.*

This morning, with the echo of Jesus sharing with us how to pray still within us, let's look at three ways to improve the passion in our worship.

If your worship has been unsatisfying, dull, and boring, these strategies will pick it up, no matter who is doing the preaching or singing. If your worship has already been passionate, get ready to rock!

To develop passionate worship, Jesus has it right, I think: first **SAY YOUR PRAYERS**. Great worship is undergirded by prayer. To worship well, we have to be spiritually prepared.

Trying to worship without preparing with prayer is like trying to run a race without stretching your muscles; you know you are going to pull something!

Do you pray for your pastor, our music ministry, congregation, and your own openness to God before you even show up on Sunday morning? When you pray to have great worship, you place yourself in God's presence, and you will be filled with an openness and a desire to experience God when you enter this place. The result will be better worship.

There's a story about one of the great pastors of the 1920's (although I can't recall the pastor's name).

In his years at this church, he had averaged 2 professions of faith, 2 conversions, every Sunday morning for something like 20 years. One day another pastor visiting asked him how he achieved this remarkable rate of conversions. Was it his preaching, the music, the beautiful sanctuary, what? The home pastor asked his visitor to follow him. Underneath the sanctuary, there was a large room, and in this room there were about 80 men praying. They were praying for the worship service that was to be held that morning. The pastor explained, "When these men go up and sit in the sanctuary, they are so warm with the Holy Spirit that they will thaw out any frozen heart that sits close to them."

When we pray before worship and pray during worship that God will enter this place and fill the hearts of God's people gathered here, I'm convinced that God's spirit will fill this congregation with passion. And our fruitfulness will grow.

A second key to passionate worship, is **KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE**. I'm not talking about marketing surveys here. We have a tendency, in our consumer culture, to view the worship service as religious entertainment. God is the producer; and is in control of the process. The pastors, musicians, ushers, and others who move around are the actors, and the congregation is the audience.

The only problem with that scenario is that it creates a passive congregation. And it leads to worship reviews, critiques of the actors' performance in worship.

“Well that was a good sermon, but the last story was really dumb. The choir sounded nice, but that one lady is always a little too loud. And my piece of bread at communion was too small.”

If we're not careful, we end up with the attitude reflected in the Dennis the Menace cartoon when, walking out of church, Dennis says to the pastor, “Pretty good show for a quarter!”

Passionate worship, on the other hand, is experienced with and directed to God. The pastors, musicians and others are all participants, trusting in God's spirit to be with us. But the people in the congregation (you) are also participants in this worship drama.

And the audience of our worship is God.

Passionate worship is directed toward our God. We do this for God. We have an “audience of One.” And the only ultimate criterion of good worship is that it please our Audience.

Years ago Bill Moyers, now famous as a fixture on PBS, was press secretary to President Lyndon Johnson. Moyers is also an ordained minister, so once at a state dinner, LBJ had Moyers say the invocation. As he was praying, the President interrupted him and said, “Speak up, Moyers, I can't hear you!”

To which Moyers replied, “With all due respect, Mr. President, I wasn't talking to you.” In passionate worship, our audience is God. It's not about us.

After being mobbed all week with lots of love thrown their way, the leader of the worship band began the last service with words to this effect: “Thanks for the love that you have sent our way this week, but never forget that this is about God. It's not about you and it's not about us... it's about God. Let's always direct our love to God.”

The third key to passionate worship is to **ENGAGE YOUR HEART**. Every worship service needs to address three areas of our lives—our intellect, our emotions, and our action. A good worship service intrigues the mind, inspires the heart, and invites us to do something.

That was my Triennium worship experience this week.

Presbyterians are generally a pretty sedate group. Over the years we have become sophisticated, and our worship has also become intellectual. I'm not against thinking about our faith. But too often we leave the heart out of our worship, and that's a pretty passionate part of our lives.

I'm not saying we should go crazy with emotionalism. But I am saying that passionate worship has to engage the heart as well as the mind. One writer about this subject writes:

“To worship speaks of devotion to God, the practices that support honor and love of God. Passionate describes an intense desire, an ardent spirit, strong feelings, and the sense of heightened importance. Passionate speaks of an emotional connection that goes beyond intellectual consent. It connotes eagerness, anticipation, expectancy, deep commitment, and belief.”

Does that describe your heart for worship?

Matt Redman is a contemporary Christian songwriter who has reached people around the world with his worship music. But early in the 1990's, he was leading worship in his church in England in a band called Soul Survivor. The band was good, but the worship was flat and uninspiring. In fact, the band was very proud of how good they were.

So one day their pastor, Mike Pilavachi, confronted the band and declared a season of no music. The congregation would sing *a cappella* until they got the right spirit back in their church. His point was that they had lost their way in worship, and the way to get back to God's heart would be to strip everything away. He wanted to challenge his church to be participants in worship, not just consumers.

Insulted, all the band members left the church—except Matt Redman. He looked deep inside himself and came up with a song which has become one of the best-loved songs in contemporary worship. It's called “The Heart of Worship,” and some of the lyrics say, “I'm coming back to the heart of worship, and it's all about you, all about you, Jesus. I'm sorry, Lord, for the thing I've made it, and it's all about you, it's all about you, Jesus.”

That season of engaging the heart and doing some soul-searching changed Matt Redman's life.

Because that's what passionate worship does. It **CHANGES YOUR LIFE**. When you begin worship with prayer, direct your worship to God, and engage your heart, something's going to change.

When we worship God in spirit and in truth, we will be moved to action—to repentance and confession, to a faithful relationship with Jesus Christ, to give of ourselves, to serve other people, to study more deeply, to engage in ministry. This is what Paul was talking about when he wrote to the Romans: *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed...”*

When we are being transformed by passionate worship, every day and every place becomes a sanctuary—a place of worship—as we live prayerfully, living our lives with God in Jesus Christ at the center of those lives.

I don't think we even realize what sort of fire we are playing with here. Annie Dillard, in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, says this about worship: “Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ...On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? Our churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”^{ii[7]}

Now I don't share that to scare anyone here today, but I do want to prepare you, because in walking into this sanctuary on Sunday morning, you are taking a risk that you might just encounter the presence of your living, loving God. And when you do, you will wonder what took you so long.

Dr. Norman Neaves and his wife Kipp were leading a group from their church on a tour of England a few years ago, and one of the stops was St. Paul's Cathedral in London. It is an awesome structure, even more beautiful on the inside that it is impressive on the outside. As Kipp was standing there admiring the beautiful artwork, she found herself standing next to an elderly British gentleman. He was looking up at the magnificent dome of St. Paul's and tears were running down his wrinkled cheeks.

After a moment he spoke these poignant words: "I live less than twenty miles from here, and yet this is the first time I've ever seen this cathedral since I moved here over 50 years ago!" He just could not imagine how beautiful and inspiring it really was, and so for 50 years he had denied himself the exquisite experience of its presence, even though he was so close.

Don't deny yourself the experience of passionate worship. Pray. Know your audience. Engage your heart. Encounter the presence of God. Change your life. Together we will bear fruit in God's world. Amen.

^{i[7]} Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper& Row, 1982), p. 40.