

SERMON: “Being Fruitful: Practicing Passionate Worship.”

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross Sun., October 24, 2010, St. James Presbyterian Church

I'm glad that you are here and that you choose to join your voice and prayers with ours this morning: you've picked a good Sunday – this is the second Sunday of our new series on fruitful living entitled “Being Fruitful” – hopefully you will find this series helpful; it is meant to both challenge and encourage you to examine the health of your spiritual life so that you will not only grow in your faith but so that your faith might bear fruit. This series – based on Robert Schnase's book **Five Practices of Fruitful Living** – is meant to help you cultivate a life that is purposeful, spiritually connected to God, and fruitful. To do this we first discussed how we must be open to allowing God into our lives – how we must first practice radical hospitality by answering God's knock at the door that we've closed to hide behind; how, to continue the vine/fruit metaphor, we must allow God to plant the seed of His grace, love, and presence into our hearts – by asking the question; have you accepted that you are accepted by God?

Once having received God – and God's grace – into your hearts; having made space for God in your lives Schnase says we can begin to love God in return: we can begin to practice the next stage of fruitful living – practicing Passionate Worship. And – like last week – there's no better place to do that than you ask you another somewhat direct and seemingly un-Presbyterian question right up front: if you love God, how do you show it? Again, if you love God, does God know it? Would your family know it – your neighbour? Does your worship – the expression of your love for God – reveal the extent of your love for God? If our created purpose – our chief end as it says in the Westminster Confession – is to glorify God; and we are planted in order to bear fruit and bring glory to God (Isaiah 60:21): the question is do you? If worship is what we were created to do, and if your answers were anything like mine, then maybe we should take a few moments to discuss what it means to practice Passionate Worship.

The first thing we have to clear up is the biggest misconception about worship – we have to be clear about what worship isn't: it isn't about us! It never was and it never will be. I know that sometimes this point gets lost – that we confuse the fact that since we come here with our needs that what we do here on Sunday morning is about us; but it isn't. Worship – true worship, worship the way it should be – expresses our love for God, our devotion to the creator, redeemer, and sustainer of life: worship, in other words, is about God. Worship is our response to God's great love for us. It is our showing our love to God in return for his first having loved us. Worship is where/when/how we offer ourselves anew to God's presence in and purpose for our lives. Worship – the act of worshipping – involves prioritizing our lives so as to set time aside/apart to focus on God's will rather than our own: it is our meeting God – our opening ourselves up to God's Spirit so we can receive God's guidance, nourishment, grace, love. True worship serves to reconfigure and realign our lives away from us – from me/you and our problems – toward God and those God calls us to love: but that's not all.

The second thing we need to know is that God doesn't want anything but our best: God makes it pretty clear throughout scripture that He doesn't want our rituals, our rules/laws, our traditions with their trappings and symbols – He just wants us, and our hearts. (Ps 51:17; Is 57:15) What God wants is a two-way relationship: a relationship where you see and sense God's love for you and a relationship in which God sees your love for Him. This is why the whole issue of our focus in worship matters: the Luke reading – a section of the longer, well-known story about the Good Samaritan – presents Luke's version of what has been called the "Christ Commandment" as being the clear and unequivocal command for us to *"love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself."* (Luke 10:27) From this we know that God desires our devotion – and that God wants to show it, through our worship, not with smoke and mirrors but totally, with all that we are – with our heart, mind, soul, and strength: worship – true worship – is to be all about our love/relationships; first for God then for our neighbour.

But relationships take work. And that's the third point about worship: worship – whether private or communal – is when we purposefully open ourselves to God's presence – it is when we gather to meet Him; it represents our regular, intentional, planned scheduled time and place to connect with God. Although God is always with us – and present wherever we are – when we arrive here, in this place set apart, with souls prepared, minds ready, and hearts open something special happens: in worship, God offers us a place to confess our brokenness, receive pardon, and be restored – to experience the full measure of grace. And finally, the fourth thing about worship is that worship brings us back to ourselves. Worship serves to ground and anchor us to what is most important: in the midst of a chaotic and fragmented world, worship connects us to God and to each other – it helps remind us that we belong to God and are called to serve a greater purpose; it provides a sense of community and our identity as Christians.

The path to fruitful living, to fully enjoying the fruits of the spiritual life God desires for us involves practicing worship seriously: it requires commitment, consistency, and conscious effort. Just as it takes persistence and cultivation to get a vine to produce fruit, growing and nurturing a relationship with God through worship takes persistence. It also takes humility. While worship lifts us up and encourages us, it also humbles us by pulling us out of ourselves. The practice of passionate worship requires a surrendering, a yielding of ourselves and of our will, and a giving up of those things that distract us from God. If we can accept this – if we can practice this – then worship has the power to change us. If we can understand that worship is what God uses to meet us where we need to be met, that it's a way by which God enters into each of us where we need Him most, then we will begin to experience worship as the healing, renewing, restoring, growing, and transforming encounter we – and God – long for it to be: and, as Jesus said, then we *"will live."* (Luke 10:28)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts enable us to open ourselves up to God as we seek to live fruitful lives. Amen