

“Misplaced Worship”

Jeremiah 7:1-7; 1 Corinthians 10:12-17;  
Matthew 15:7-11

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We have been talking about worship for the last few weeks. The first Sunday we talked about worship and the nature of worship. I gave you the image of sitting around the Round Table like Knights of the Round Table coming to honor and give allegiance, then to go and do what honors the king. It is that idea of coming into the king's presence and thinking about who we are there for and why—to honor and give our allegiance.

The next week we thought about what we do when we come to this kind of worship and why we do some of what we do. One of the things is that we want to worship God with all of who we are so we do more than just use words and prayers, we use singing and music. We give more to our worship than one simple thing so it involves more of who we are. Then, we have a pattern through which we work. We call ourselves to worship, sing God's praises, think about who we are and how thankful we are that God takes the struggles we have and works with them, then we think about the word of God together and respond to it.

So as we have thought about the nature of worship and the elements of worship, I was thinking today about where is worship in our lives. Sometimes it feels like we can go through our lives and not even think about worship, like we've lost it—it's misplaced somewhere. Of course, when I came up with the sermon title today, I wasn't thinking we simply misplaced worship as if we put it somewhere and can't find it, like when I can't remember where my keys are. But sometimes it feels a little bit that way in our society. We have somehow misplaced worship. It doesn't hold that central place that it might.

But the other way I was thinking about the idea of misplacing worship was that we place our worship in the wrong place. We give it to that which doesn't really deserve to be worshiped. If you notice, several of the scriptures today were about idols and moving away from that which is idolatrous. Now I don't suppose that most of us today really have some figurine made of wood or stone or metal that we think is imbued with some divine power. That kind of idol we probably don't have, so we're not idolatrous in that sense.

Do we have idols today? We have teen idols. American idols. Of course, that's a little different thing. We're not really thinking about them in an idolatrous way, or are we? I think it might point to something that we might allow to become idolatrous in our lives. There's so much emphasis and focus on being famous, on being the best. That is what makes one's life complete. It's "fame" we should go after, what we should give our life to. So in that sense, we can begin to think about what is idolatrous—not necessarily some figurine—but what is it we give our honor and allegiance to. What do we hold up as so special in our lives and think about, and want to move towards?

One way to help me think about that is to think about what gives my life direction. What do I prioritize? Where do I find direction? As I was thinking about that, I can look for directions when I feel lost. I can pull out a map. Of course, I have to be able to see it, and find where I am on it and find where I want to go, which isn't always easy. Maybe I can get out a GPS device and see if it can locate where I am, first of all, and then where I want to go. So there's the print media and the electronic media. But if neither of those is working, I can say that I have it within myself to find the way. Somehow all three of these fit in our society today. We look to those different things to find our way. And what are we finding?

The other piece is that even if I'm pretty sure I found where I am and where I want to go, what I've often found is like this: I've gone out hiking and I've got my map and it's telling me pretty much where I'm supposed to be, but I think it's wrong. I've worked a lot harder and gone a lot farther than it's telling me I've gone. So what do I want to do? I simply want to throw it away. And then where am I? I'm lost.

Where is my direction? That's the question we ask when we begin to think about what we worship. Where is my direction? What are my priorities? What am I giving my allegiance to? What am I aligning myself to? How do I begin to check on that? What kind of direction is in my life? What are the things that are there? What kinds of things can they be?

For me, one of those that seems to become almost idolatrous in my life is the very idea of being busy. Somehow I'm supposed to be busy all the time and I give my life to busyness because I'm supposed to be busy. It makes me special in some way. There are all kinds of things that can begin to be idolatrous in our lives. Maybe it's not just the busyness, but it's the reason I'm busy—because I'm paying so much attention to what other people think of me. It's back to that fame idea.

What is it in our lives that we look to for our direction, that we let shape us, that we have given our allegiance to, that our direction is determined by? Wherever that goes, there we go. It's interesting, as we read the scriptures today, particularly Jeremiah. He says they are saying, "We have the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord!" So we are fine. Jeremiah is saying, wait a second. You are setting up that place as idolatry because it's more important that you have this place and are seen there and that you go through the motions there than it is to think about what God wants of you—a real allegiance. It's not just where you are seen, it's what you do. It's who you are. Jeremiah asks the people to do justice and to pay attention to God, not just to some building, not just to go someplace where people gather because it's easy then to just gather to be seen. How is our life directed? What's directing it?

As we go on to think about the scribes, they had their lives very directed and claimed it was all about God, but notice what Jesus says. You seem to have missed something. You're teaching human precepts as doctrines. He asks, "Where is your heart." Not "what do you know," but "where is your heart?" How does what you know associate

with your heart, and where is your heart? Is it near to God? What comes out of your heart?

Notice what Jesus says can easily come out of the human heart: evil intentions. We can go through that list and say I'm not a murderer or adulterer or a thief, but if I really look at that list I may admit that there are times when I want to say something that might not be so helpful about somebody else. A slanderer, after all. There may be ways where I think nobody really needs this thing as much as I do, approaching thievery. There are ways in which the human heart is devious and doesn't stay near to God. I think Jesus is even warning us about being too sure about our traditions, our own ways of understanding. They can begin to be our own idols. I think 1 Corinthians helps us see that when Paul suggests what it's about is recognizing not that we're better than somebody else, not that we can use what we think to separate the sheep and the goats (that's not our job). It's not what we know about who's in and out. It's about are we one body? Do we all partake of the one loaf? Do we all follow Jesus? That's what he's calling us to. What defiles us comes out of our mouths when our hearts are not near Jesus.

What is our worship? What do we worship? Where do we find our direction? Do we recognize why we do what we do? If I can recognize that I'm beginning to get lost, that I'm not listening to the direction, I'm going in the wrong direction, what do I do? I love the word used in the scripture: flee. "Flee idolatry!" It's not just "Don't pay any attention." It's not just "Look the other way." It's "Flee!" Make an effort to get out the situation that leads me astray to the situation that leads me on the right path. Leave that stuff that leads us astray behind—flee it—and move towards what God gives.

That's the table. It's the invitation to come and be with God, to let God nourish us, to think about where our hearts are and say, "I want my heart to be near to God." I want to allow God to work on my heart so that what comes out of it is not evil intentions, but grace. What comes out of it is not how I want to skewer somebody else, but how I can love them. How can I open my heart, come near, come to the table. Part of it is saying, "I want to leave my idols behind. I just want to come and I know that God will be here and be present."

God will lead us as we open our hearts, worship him, and flee those idols, those other things that we could so easily give our allegiance and our honor to. So come. Let's bring our hearts near to God. Amen.

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Gracious God, let us come. Let us see our own lives in a way that helps us move away, flee, that which is idolatrous and come again to you. Let our hearts be close to you and in the place where we can become one body because you have given it to us to allow us to become the very grace you have given us, the love you have shown us, the hope that you have set before us. Let us come. Let our hearts be near you, open to you, that you might work on them. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.