

Worship
Hebrews 10: 19-25
November 11, 2012
CCUMC
Melanie Dobson Hughes

Why Worship?

Why do we worship? Why do we come here Sunday after Sunday to see the same people and drink the same coffee after worship? Why do we come here on a beautiful weekend day, while all the rest of our neighbors are out hiking, or mountain biking, or soon—will be skiing? Why do we worship?

According to the most recent survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, many people in America are choosing not to come to worship. According to this study, the majority of Americans still believe in some deity, but church participation is down. The number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today is 16%--the highest number in American history. Among Americans aged 18-29, one in four say they are not currently affiliated with any religion. Look around here---are there any in our midst aged 18-29? (no—this is the same story across the church. We are missing the whole millennial generation.) One in five men say they have no religious affiliation, and so make up a bulk of that 16% who are not in worship.¹ In broad strokes then, we are missing young adults and men from our congregations. They are answering the question, “why do we worship” with a strong “I don’t know, and I’m not interested in being in a church.” Their reasons tend to be that they are turned off to institutions, that they would rather find God in nature or in a yoga studio, or that they or someone they love has been hurt by judgmentalism, or worse, abuse, by the church. Particularly the millennial generation wants to make a difference in the

¹ “US Religious Landscape Survey: Summary of Key Findings,” by Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

world, to serve---and they don't think the church is a place that can assist them in such work. Why bother coming to worship, then, they say.

Congregation of Hebrews—"Why do we worship?"

The author of Hebrews had a bunch of people also wondering "why do we come to worship?" In Hebrews 12, it states that worship had become for them darkness and gloom. They had drooping hands and weak knees from the burdens of religion. They wondered what more God could want from them.² The congregation faced waning zeal and a noticeable decline in attendance at its worship. The sails of their little boat of the church were hanging limp, even with the breeze of the Holy Spirit trying to stir them.

The reasons for this lethargy about worship were many. Many came out of the Jewish faith, and wondered about returning to the faith of their ancestors, instead of this crazy new religion about a wild prophet named Jesus. The congregation was enduring persecution from the Roman government; many people were afraid to come to worship for fear of being punished or imprisoned. The Jews and the secular citizens accused them of heresy, of being lunatics for following the way of Christ. In the congregation itself several leaders were fighting for dominance. Many also felt discouragement that Christ hadn't come back again, as he had promised. The people in the Hebrews congregation had some legitimate reasons for staying away. Why should we worship, they wondered, if we might be punished, if our Jewish friends ridicule us, if our own leaders are infighting, if even Christ in whom we are supposed to believe hasn't returned?

Hebrews Answer to "Why we worship"

In our passage for today, the author of Hebrews makes a strong exhortation to his people. He is trying to preach his strongest sermon to try and convince his people to come

² Thomas Long, "What God Wants," *Christian Century* (March 21, 2006), 19.

to worship. He uses the rhythm of language to urge them into action; “Let us approach God, let us hold fast, let us help one another!”

1. Jesus

He begins this urgent cajoling of his people by first asserting that Jesus is the reason why we worship. Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice in the holy of holies for us! Jesus is the lamb of God, whose blood offers us redemption! Jesus tears aside the curtain that used to separate the people from the priests doing their work in the inner sanctum of the temple. Jesus thus removes all obstacles in our ability to approach God. Christ is our high priest who opens up the way of relationship of us with God. All of you who want a relationship with God, who want a deeper spiritual life? Jesus gave that relationship to us. We worship because Jesus gave himself for us. We worship because Jesus opened up a new and living way for us to God. We worship because Jesus died for us.

2. Faith

The author doesn't stop there, with this primary reason. He goes on. I'll tell you why we worship Jesus, he says. First, let us move forward to God. Let us draw near with faith. This is the second reason we worship; so that we might have faith. It's awfully hard to maintain faith by yourself. All of you staying at home out of fear, all of you staying on a mountain top—you are going to get confused, full of doubt, lose faith. We can't draw near to God without faith, and we can't sustain faith on our own. That's why we worship—so that our faith might be strengthened. We need all of us, we need to worship together in order to keep the faith.

3. Hope

Then, the author says, I'll tell you a third reason why we worship—not only because Jesus died for us, not only to keep the faith, but also to keep the hope. Let us hold on, he says. Let's keep on keeping on—that's hope in the midst of persecution. Let us be confident, let us be firm, because we can trust in Jesus, who made promises to us. Jesus is coming back, we must hope in that.

4. Love

I'll tell you a fourth reason why we worship, the author says. Let us love each other. Those of you feeling lethargic, those of you feeling slothful—because we love you we are going to provoke you. We are going to irritate you out of your lethargy—so that you can do good things for others. Let us out of love get you off your duff. Let us pester you out of apathy and into service. Let us out of love get you doing loving things for others---and you'll experience the love of God in return. That's why we worship—so that we can practice deeper love for our own people and for others.

If the sermon really worked, you can almost imagine the people of this Hebrews congregation standing and giving a big group hug. Oh, yeah, they say. That's right. We come to worship because of what Jesus did for us. Oh, yeah. That's right. We come to worship so that we can keep the faith. Oh yeah. That's right. We come to worship so that we can keep on keeping on in a world that's growing ever darker. Yeah, That's right. We come to worship so that we do the work of loving each other.

Why We Worship

The words of the preacher of Hebrews address us, too. We don't endure persecution for our faith, we aren't afraid of being imprisoned for coming to church. According to other Pew research, we live here in one of the most secular parts of the

country—our percentage of “nones—or nonaffiliated people” is much higher than 16% in this valley. While all those “nones” are out on the ski slopes and hiking trails and rivers seeking God, why should we bother to come to church. Why should we bother to come to worship?

The answer is the same for us as it was for the people of the Hebrew congregation long ago. We come to worship because of what Jesus did and continues to do for us. Jesus makes it possible for us to be in direct relationship with God; worship gives us the words and the practices to help us to do just that—to praise our maker.

Even more, worship sustains our faith, gives us hope, and supports us in the hard work of loving people. Faith, hope, and love—that’s why we worship. With faith, hope, and love alive in our beings, we become closer to what God created us to be. Early church father Irenaeus said that “glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Jesus walked into the sanctuary of the holy of holies and placed himself on the altar that we might have a chance at full life.³ When we worship, we live into that chance at full life. Worship that cultivates faith, hope, and love gives us the chance at being a human being fully alive. Why wouldn’t we want to come here and work at the chance to be fully alive?

To those outside the church, those aged 18-29, those men who are bored by church, to those who reject institutions, we have a great message here as to why we worship. Come to worship, we can say, so that you can learn to draw near to God with faith. Eventually on that mountaintop you are going to get confused and lonely. Come be with us so that we can learn our way to God together; you need community to sustain faith. Come to worship, we can say, so that you can hold onto hope. The world is crazy and dark. We need each other to cling to, to help us hope when hoping gets hard. Come to worship, we can say, so that

³ Ibid.

you can love. It's awfully hard to love others when you are alone. We're going to mess up, we're not going to be perfect, we're not going to always make coffee like you like it—but we're trying here. We're trying to provoke ourselves out of our own laziness, and get out there and do loving things. Christ has already changed the word for good—we're just trying to participate in that, and we'd like your help in loving you and others.

Why do we worship? Because of what Christ does for us. Let us draw near with faith. Let us hold on to hope. Let us show love and do good works. Amen