

## **“For a Vibrant, Fruitful and Growing Congregation Part I”**

Psalms 1:1-3, Colossians 1:3-10

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The last two Sundays, I have preached about mission. I would rather call it “Out-reach” ministry. For the next two Sundays, I am going to talk about “In-reach” ministry, a new sermon series, practices for a vibrant, fruitful and growing congregation: Passionate worship and intentional faith development. We are going to kick off our stewardship campaign next Sunday and it will end on Sunday, September 28<sup>th</sup>. I am going to preach on the topic of “passionate worship”, as part 1 this morning. I will continue to talk about the subject of “intentional faith development”, as part 2 on the first Sunday in October.

Some of you may wonder why your pastor is so enthusiastic and passionate about these topics, even though no one has expressed any concerns and complaints about worship. Do I think that our church has anything seriously wrong or lacking in our ministries? NO! I truly love our church and congregation. My intent is to explore a better way to improve our passion and devotion to God. Our worship is a part of spiritual practices. I hope that our church continues to grow and becomes a vibrant and fruitful congregation in our ministries. If we stop our practices, our spiritual body will get weakened and unhealthy.

Let’s look at the Coca-Cola company as an example of stopping our practices. John Pemberton invented Coca-Cola and he developed Coca-Cola, essentially a nonalcoholic version of French Wine Coca back in 1886. The Coca-Cola company advertising strategy was well known in the United States investing the modern image of Santa Claus as an old man in a red-and-white suit. Now, everybody knows Coca-Cola, not only in the United States, but also in over 200 countries worldwide. More than 1.8 billion Coke beverages are served every day. Probably, they don’t need any more advertizing investment, but they still have developed and tried new products such as Diet Coke and Caffeine Free Coke. For the same reason, we the church should invest in ourselves by continuing our practices and exploring better possibilities.

Let’s begin with our definition of worship. What is worship? I want to use a quote from our Old Testament reading. The Psalmist says, “You’re like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither.” If we say that the church is us, the people of God, each of us can be compared to a tree. When we are planted by streams of water, we can grow

and bear our fruits. Worship is a place like streams of water. Like the hymn, As the Deer, “As the deer panteth for the water/So my soul longeth after Thee/You alone are my heart’s desire/And I long to worship Thee.” Worship is a personal encounter with the presence of the living God. Great worship **nurtures** our souls and **connects** us to God and one another.

I brought this tomato plant from my backyard. It has withered. This is my confession that it withered and didn’t bear much fruit because I forgot to water it for four days. This is clear evidence of what will happen when there is no water for life. It is the same metaphor as great worship providing water for our spiritual growth. Great worship means passionate worship. Passionate worship isn’t contemporary or traditional style of worship, but it is the congregation’s meeting with their own God in their active worship participation.

How can we generate more passion or improve our passion for our worship? Please don’t get me wrong. I am not challenging us to change our Sunday worship to a different style of worship like a contemplative service (Taize folk service, chanting) or a contemporary style of worship like Bayside Church in Granite Bay. But I hope that we develop passionate worship in our own worship practice. Pastor William O. (Bud) Reeves, of the First United Methodist Church in Hot Springs, Arkansas, suggests three ways to improve the passion in our worship: Say your prayer, know your audience and Engage your heart. He reminds us of some good points about our attitude towards worship.

**First of all, he mentions the importance of prayer.** He emphasizes this saying, “Great worship is undergirded by prayer. We have to be spiritually prepared to worship. Trying to worship without preparing in prayer is like trying to run a race without stretching your muscles first.” If you pray to have great worship, God will hear those prayers, and you will be filled with a spiritual expectancy when you enter this place.

**Secondly, he says that the audience of our worship is not us, but God.** We have a tendency, in our consumer culture to view the worship service like religious entertainment. Maybe some of us understand our worship as this model: God is the producer and he is in control of every process. Your pastor, musician, and ushers who move around are actors and the congregation is the audience. In this model, we easily like to review and critique the performance of worship. For example, we may say, “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.” This type of worship attitude creates a passive congregation. We need to remember this: In our passionate worship, our audience is not the congregation, but our God. Your pastor, music director, choir and the congregation are the producers. Our

worship is directed at God. Our only ultimate goal of worship is that it pleases our audience, God in Heaven.

**The last one is “to engage our hearts”.** Methodists are generally a pretty sedate group. Over the years we have become sophisticated, and our worship became intellectual. But it was not like that in the beginnings of Methodism. John Wesley constantly had to defend himself against charges of “enthusiasm” or inappropriate emotionalism in religious services. The early Methodists were called “shouting Methodists” because of their exuberance in worship. Don’t get me wrong. I am not suggesting to go crazy with emotionalism but I am talking about engaging our hearts as well as the mind in our worship. A good worship service intrigues the mind, inspires the heart, and invites us to do something. It is important to have our intellect, our emotions, and our action as a well balanced integration. Bishop Schnase, of the Missouri conference, writes in his book *Five Practices For Fruitful Congregations* : “To worship speaks of devotion to God, the practices that support honor and love of God. Passionate speaks of an emotional connection that goes beyond intellectual consent. It connotes eagerness, anticipation, expectancy, deep commitment, and belief.”

For a practice of passionate worship, the worship team decided to try a new order of worship on Sunday, October 12<sup>th</sup> as a pilot worship program. After service, we would love to hear your feedback and about your new worship experience. The worship team will evaluate a new order of worship and work to improve our worship. Briefly speaking on a new format, we are going to move our prayers of people, pastoral prayer and a time of passing the peace of Christ to the beginning of service. Those will be placed right after a time of welcome. There will be neither unison prayer nor singing in our prayers. Instead, while we are singing three short hymns, I am going to open a time of prayer and invite the congregation to lift your single sentence spontaneous prayer, petition or thanksgiving to God. After each prayer may be spoken, the congregation will be invited to respond to each prayer, saying “Lord Hear Our Prayer”. I hope that we all engage our hearts in this new way. The Apostle Paul reminds us that the purpose of our prayer is not to receive our favorite answers from God, but to learn more and more how God works in our life. Take Paul’s note for your spiritual advice: “We haven’t stopped praying for you, asking God to give you wise minds and spirits attuned to his will, and so acquire a thorough understanding of the ways in which God works.” Our worship is more about a spiritual practice to discern God’s will and learn how God works in our life.

What will be our ultimate purpose of passionate worship practice? Bishop Schnase calls the final goal of passionate worship as the “optimum environment for conversion.” If we continue to repeat the passionate worship saying our prayers, directing our worship at God and engaging our hearts every Sunday, I

believe that something is going to change and this will change our life. I like to share Bishop Schnase's comment on the role of the congregation as I close my message. He says, "Congregations offer the invitation and welcome of Christ, provide worship that connects us to God and to one another, offer opportunities for people to grow in Christ by learning in community, relieve suffering and improve the conditions of people in need through service and mission, and teach people to give of themselves." Like trees planted by streams of water, we all hope to grow in the knowledge of God, and bear fruit in our life through our ongoing passionate worship at every Sunday service. Amen.