

***On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand***  
Reflections on Our Statement of Faith  
Week 6: Worship  
2-11-18 Michael Barrett

Our UCC Statement of Faith reads, *“Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto our God.”*

In the United Church of Christ, our faith has many dimensions and stands on the solid rock of certain belief. Over the past weeks, we have explored our faith in a God as one who is the Source of our creation and the ever seeker of us out; as a divine Savior who comes to us; as a holy Spirit who sustains us; as an inclusive presence that calls us into holy community, and as a generous deity that promises forgiveness and passport to eternal life.

We have faith in a God who loves us not because we are good at something nor because we act holy nor because we deserve that love nor because we could earn that love. We know that we are loved and loved without condition because it is in the nature of our Father and His Son, through the Holy Spirit to pour themselves into our lives and make us truly beloved.

We believe that how we act and what we do make a real difference – to God, to His creation, to each other, and, yes, even to our very selves. One such action that we repeatedly do is called worship. We have faith in worship.

At its most intimate, worship is itself an act all about celebrating love.

In the United Church of Christ, as with most of its other programs, positions, and principles; our faith in worship begins with the sanction of Scripture. That is the reason Dale Forbes just read to us the magnificent worship hymn, Psalm 96.

Much about worship is explained therein – who to worship and how to do it, instruction on both rationale and range, and finally, hope is inspired and the inevitable is indicated. Psalm 96 is primary authority for our worship. Psalm 96 is also a resource for what we are tasked to

proclaim by name and praise by His deeds of salvation, honor, strength, beauty, power, justice, and healing to the lost, our neighbors, the families, and the everybody's of this world. Psalm 96 is simply replete with good news to share. If we are going to go out and singing and proclaiming that the LORD REIGNS, then we had better be able to tell people what that means and the rationale for what we say.

This morning let us begin by reflecting on the meaning of what we do, how we do it, and why we do what we do in worship.

*Sing to our Lord, Praise our Lord, Worship our Lord.*

The term 'worship' is derived from the words 'weorth' meaning to ascribe honor, value, or worth to something and 'scibe' meaning to praise, ascribe or attest. In other words, we gather on Sundays to attest to God's worth. Worship is for God. And God alone! No other Gods. God is *awesomely supreme: other gods are useless and vain*. They are idols.

The words of the psalmist are as important to day as when they first appeared in the polytheistic world of ancient Canaan. Are power or popularity our Ptah, is the Internet our Isis, is money our Marduk, or is business, career and work our Baal? Is not worshiping on Sunday, the first day of our week, an indication of our putting God first for that day, and over any competing idols, useless and vain, that will follow during the other days of the week?

*Praise His name, Praise our Lord for the majesty of His name.*

The terms Yahweh, Jehovah, Adonai or even God are the proper nouns we use to name our Lord in our praise. Yet, in the context of the Bible, remember a name also stands for the attributes of one's character.

Think of the other names of God we have heard -- creator, light, father, savior, counselor, sustainer, shepherd, lamb, papa/daddy, God is with us, mother hen, many breasted one, prince of peace, bread of life, cup of salvation, messiah – there are over 300 names of God in the Bible. It is both His name and His character we praise. That is what we are singing about.

*Bend to worship Him, Bow before Him.*

The way we organize our worship is called liturgy. The term liturgy, like worship, is derived from two other terms – laos (people) and ergon (work). Liturgy is the work of the people. The whole people! Worship in the United Church of Christ requires the entire congregation – not just the clergy. No one is put here just to enjoy the play. The event is not intended for us. The show is presented for God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the audience.

This entire sanctuary, including the pews, is the stage. Everyone here is a cast member – a participant not a playgoer. Every one of us is an actor with a unique, individual role, which, in the eyes of God no one else can play.

My brothers and sisters, please understand that –  
your lay readers are not performers, but prompters;  
your musicians are not entertainers, but enablers;  
and that your preachers are not the stars of the show, but like you,  
simple students of our Savior, striving to honor God in homily.

What does we emphasize in worship? Education has its three r's [reading, riting, and rithmetic). Our worship has its five r's – ritual, revelation, response, relationship, and rehearsal. These are the five major ways in which the UCC, through worship, labors that we may encounter a God we find trustworthy; that we may learn that God's inclusive concern, welcome, and love is for each of us; that we may grasp that God's compassion is large enough to care for us in everything, everywhere, and every time; and finally, that God wishes is to invite us to participate in the establishment of His realm.

The five "R's" of worship:

**RITUAL:** Worship uses symbolic words and actions repeatedly to serve a spiritual function. Weird – think of our daily rituals – the way we brush our teeth, reading the morning paper, the Facebook check-ins, the afternoon walk, flowers on Mother's Day, birthday cards, or that kiss good night. Ritual gives us a sense of continuity and cohesion, when it is done with sincerity and meaning. Ritual evokes the words, songs, and actions we know by heart. Ritual dictates seasons of focused worship – the patient expectation of Advent, the contrition and sacrifice of Lent,

the joy of Eastertide, the deepening faith of Pentecost, all because God cannot be expressed in a single Sunday service. Religious rituals – baptisms, confirmations, weddings, memorials, help us to heal life’s sorrows and integrate life’s experiences. Greeting other worshipers, sharing communion, saying the Lord’s Prayer, joining in a closing circle, flowering a cross, yuletide greening, and singing “Silent Night” at every Christmas Service are all CCN rituals.

To feel more deeply worship as ritual, ask which rituals express who we are. Ask which rituals support us in times of crisis or life passage? What do we know by heart? What do we need to add, change or enhance? Worship that is sensitive to the rhythms of our lives helps celebrates God’s love.

REVELATION: UCC worship expressly requires using the very means God has given us to emphasize His real presence in the liturgy we offer. We assert the WORD of God revealed in Scripture. We reflect on the message of good news. We administer the sacraments biblically instituted by our Lord – baptism and Eucharist. We use music and drama, art and architecture, flora and fauna to emphasize God’s presence among us. We focus on the long story of God’s effort to save us culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and upon the faith journeys of those going before us.

To feel more deeply worship, as revelation, ask where is there a strong sense of God’s presence? How is God acting among us? Worship reveals that none of us are alone. God is still and ever with us. And that love we can celebrate.

RESPONSE: Worship provides us with the opportunity to respond to what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will do in each of our lives. The creativity, the wisdom, the justice, the care and compassion, or the goodness of God may trigger our need to express appreciation. Worship affords us that opportunity. Our response may simply be voiced, as in 1 John 4, “We love because God first loved us.” Or Meister Eckhart’s ‘thanks’ and ‘thanks’ and ‘thanks.’ Again, a matter of love.

*We sing to our Lord, We praise our Lord, We proclaim our Lord. We bow before Him. We bring offerings and bend to worship Him.*

Yes, my brothers and sisters, each and every time we place an offering into the collection, we are making an act of worship.

To feel more deeply, worship as response, ask what is God doing in our lives, our church, our community, and our world? How do we respond to what God is doing in worship? Worship allows us the space to reverence, praise, and thank God. Worship allows us in appreciation to celebrate our love.

RELATIONSHIP: Worship seeks to provide a space where through genuine encounter with God, our relationship with Him grows and deepens. Relationship is where God's revelation and our human response cross, connect, and combine with one another.

Worship strives to emulate the affinity modeled by the Holy Trinity. A Trinity embodying consummate love – The Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit -- the creative, the salvatory, and the sustaining persons of God holding each in mutual adoration; emanating light, life, and love. It is a perfect relationship of praise and provision, creation and compassion, salvation and sustenance. Worship aims to enhance in us the image of God in which we are made.

For some mysterious reason, human praise, petition, and penance energize God our relationship with God. He provides us invigorating energy when we provide proactive praise to Him. It is a blest cycle of praise and provision and praise and provision and praise . . . Worship seeks to instill in each of us that same loving and caring relationship in our dealing with one another. And then with the Creation gifted to us. God intends all of His creation to be in compassionate, constructive, and covenantal relationships.

*Let ALL THE Earth Rejoice!* Did we hear the universal emphasis in Psalm 96? It is not just us and all those seraphim and cherubim that have invitations to the celebration – but all creation! The sea, the fields, the animals, even the trees are to join in the rejoicing. Worship asks us what do these words indicate about our relationship with the creation with whose welfare we have been entrusted? How likely are polluted seas,

stripped mined earth, endangered species, and depleted rain forests to rejoice?

To feel more deeply worship as relationship, ask how does our worship build relationship with God, with one another, and with the rest of creation. Worship seeks inspired giving and receiving. It celebrates the love between and among everything.

REHEARSAL: *Sing to all nations, proclaim to the lost and neighbors, praise to all families, and everyone.* God has no intention of sending us out to praise, sing, and proclaim to all these folks without some training. Even Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness in preparation. Worship affords rehearsal time as a way of practicing and refining our sense of love, justice, and peace for life in the world. Worship aims to transform us and, in the process, prepare us to take an effective part in bringing God's realm. In worship, we form and refine patterns of behavior that we will need to carry God's message forward. It is here in worship that we learn to be Jesus' hands and feet. – the instruments of God's love, justice, healing, and peace. We are preparing for what is to come.

*Our Lord is coming. He judges us with justice. He is coming to set everything right. He is coming to judge.* Please do not confuse God's judgment with what passes as human judgment. Human judgment is often about punishment, anger, and fear; it may be critical, harsh, and unloving; it may also be impaired, prejudicial, and partial; and it often lacks concern for the poor while favoring the powerful. God's judgment is none of these things. God's judgment is righteous, rational, and reparative; it brings unity, harmony, and fellowship; it heals what is broken and mends what is torn asunder; and it treats all with love and respect. God's judgment is restorative of the love that fosters fellowship and fulfillment. God's judgment is a source of hope.

To feel more deeply worship as rehearsal, ask what are we practicing here? How does our worship support and enhance peace, justice, and fellowship? What patterns are we creating that contribute to bringing God's realm on earth? Worship strives to integrate the actions of Sunday into deeds of faith, hope and love in the world.

Above all, worship is a matter of love and strains to help us realize that:

God's love is deep enough to save us, heal us and transform us for the better,  
That God's love is strong enough to overcome our self-contentedness, selfishness, and self-absorption;  
That God's love is revolutionary enough to enable us to imitate Jesus better;  
That God's love is awesome enough to shatter the tiny, convenient forgettable little boxes into to which we keep trying to cram him, and that God's love is far-reaching enough to include us in sharing and addressing the worldly needs He is already working on.

Thomas Merton once wrote: *In the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion; a point of pure truth; a point or spark that belongs entirely to God; [a point] which is never at our disposal; from which God disposes our lives; [a point] which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.*

*It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody and if we could see it, we would see billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of the sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.*

This is God's valentine to you and it's already at the center of your heart. Open it. God's is a love worth celebrating.

Psalm 96 is Scripture's valentine to you. Take Psalm 96 home and to heart. Post it on the front of your refrigerator, use it as a screen saver, or hang it above your office desk. It reminds us of a love worth celebrating.

This Wednesday is both Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday. Ash Wednesday begins our journey to that bloodstained cross atop Golgotha and the site of the greatest single act of love humankind will ever experience. Consider making this Wednesday evening your Valentines to God by coming to worship.

And if any one asks you where you are going, please try not to say, "I'm going to church." Instead say, "I'm going to worship because my Lord and I have a love worth celebrating."

Amen.