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THE BELIEVER'S HIGHEST OCCUPATION Michael B. Beough
John 4:16-26 September 7, 2008
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Several weeks ago, I came across an article in the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. It is about a man named Yousef Taleb Rashid who lives in Baghdad. The first time I read the article, I could feel this man's pathos. It tells how for 40 years this man has walked through the streets of Baghdad almost every day to get to a particular café he likes. In spite of the gun battles, demonstrations, and dangers around every corner, he has not failed to visit this café. Why? Because this café plays the music of only one singer who for him expresses the sorrow and struggles of his life. The Egyptian singer is supposedly the most famous singer in the history of Egypt. She has been dead for 40 years.

Rashid goes, sits on a bench with other men who "weep as they remember lost lovers, lost youth, and lost life." His family tells him that "You will sacrifice your life for Umm Kulthoum."

The second time I read this article, I realized it is about worship.

If I wanted to argue that humans are made for worship, I would point to Rashid. *Without a doubt, we are worshipping beings. We will worship something, even if it is ourselves or the Devil itself.*

But my interest in the article goes beyond that. Rashid gives us an example of the kind of worship God wants from us. In the fourth chapter of John's gospel, the 23rd verse, Jesus calls it worshipping in spirit and truth. I call this kind of worship one of the three essential practices of Ancient Modern Discipleship. I believe that we in the church need to go back to the simplicity of these ancient biblical practices that instilled hope in the first Christians and empowered them to change the world.

It seems to me that a lot of what we do in the church is sometimes just too complicated, too confusing to outsiders, and beside the point. To outsiders, we even look – well, unchristian. That is just unacceptable if we really believe that there is something in our experience of Jesus Christ that others cannot live without.

In John, chapter 4, Jesus has a conversation about worship with a Samaritan woman. He is hanging out at the local Starbucks of that day and time, the well everyone comes to to get water. He is lurking when she walks up. Jesus begins the conversation because he wants to minister to her. As the conversation moves along, he starts getting personal. He reveals that he knows about her five former husbands. He knows that the man she is living with is not her husband. Suddenly, or so it seems, she changes the subject to worship.

Some commentators believe she is changing the conversation to avoid talking about her personal life. I believe she is moving the conversation to one of the most important questions of our lives. Where can we find true worship?

Believe it or not, that question was on the front burner of the cultural arguments in that day and time: Who is right about the proper place and way to worship God? Us Samaritans or you Jews? In other words, we don't like the way you worship, and you don't like our way. So, who's right? Which of us should change?

Now, she is asking the worship question in the only way she knows how. She assumes there is a right way and a wrong way to worship. A right place and a wrong place. Right music and wrong music. Right architecture and wrong architecture. Right color of carpet and wrong color of carpet. All the things we keep arguing about even today.

Notice how Jesus answers her. The important thing about worship is not how you do it or where you do it or the forms you use or the level of technology you employ or the tradition you inherited from the past or the beat of the music. In fact, when you focus on those things, you are in danger of completely missing the kind of worship our heavenly Father wants. The time is coming, Jesus says to her, when all those things we argue over will disappear in importance. The time is coming when we will start worshipping our Father in heaven in the only way it matters, in spirit and truth. The time that is coming is his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. When that happens, we will then know the only One who is worthy of our worship. He will be the heart of our worship.

I am ashamed to say that there have been many times when I have focused on the wrong thing when it comes to worship. I have even led worship services where I did not worship. I have used the excuse that I am so busy making sure everything comes off just right and that I don't stumble over my words and that the temperature is just right and that I don't offend anyone – I have used all these excuses to justify why I can't really worship. And sometimes I think if I weren't expected to be here, I might just stay home for all the good it is doing me. Do you ever feel that way?

I don't know. Maybe I am the only one in this church who goes through the motions of worship sometimes without really worshipping. But let me tell you something. My excuses are just that. The only one responsible for my inability to worship is me.

Over the past couple of years, Jesus has been speaking to my heart. He has been saying to me that worship of the living God is not first of all about the proper place or the proper forms or the right music or the inherited tradition or smooth words or even the latest technology. It is about

worshiping the Father in the spirit of the Father and in the truth of the Father.

What Jesus wants us to see is that worship begins deep in our hearts. It begins there, in that overwhelming sense that comes over us when we realize who God is and what God has done for us and what God wants of us. It is our spirit rising up to meet the Great Spirit like a moth drawn to a flame. Worship gushes up within us like a spring of living water.

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hen we gaze upon the dying form of God's Son on the cross, and when we hear the shouts of joy and wonder, "He is not here. He is risen!", we tremble with the mystery and awe of it.
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hen we look upon the holiness of God and yet experience His tender mercy, like a Shepherd leading us beside still waters, we grasp for the words and the forms that help us express what is rising in our hearts because if we don't express it, we feel we will die.
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hen our lives crumble and something like heavenly grace reaches down to pick us up, and joy comes in the morning after a night of sorrow, we lift our eyes to the heavens and thank God.
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hen a life gets turned around or an injustice goes away or an impossible situation becomes possible or a challenge is met, then out of our hearts without premeditation comes the praise of our hearts.

Worship as Jesus desires it is not about the steps we go through or the bulletin we follow or the kind of songs we sing. It is what is happening inside us that gets expressed outwardly in all the crazy, creative ways that help us serenade our God. What God wants is our hearts.

Several of us attended a worship conference at Canyon Creek Presbyterian Church recently. The keynote speaker and worship leader was Robin Mark, an internationally known worship leader, worship song writer, recording artist, and author. He calls worship the believer's highest occupation. He does not mean attending worship. What a horrible phrase that is! *Did you attend worship today?* How God must cringe if we think of worship only as attendance! The question should be, *Did you worship today?* Hopefully, the music was good, the sermon was not totally confusing, the temperature was about right, all the information in the bulletin was correct, and the microphone didn't squeal.

But the question is, Did you worship God? Did you open your heart to God? Did you express your praise in some way? Did you bow before him in repentance and receive a forgiving word? Did you listen for his Word to you? Did you hear Him calling you to a new way of life or to a change in your life or to some new service in Jesus' name? Did you pray? Did He touch your

heart in some way? Hopefully, what happens and what is done in the service helps you do all those things. Hopefully, the worship leaders are not just going through the motions. Hopefully, Jesus is at the heart of it. But the question is, Did you worship God?

I agree with Robin Mark. Worship is the believer's highest occupation. And that is why I want to share with you **my personal goal for our church.**

I believe worship is so important to our lives that over the past several months, I have prayed privately and with others that God would fill this worship center every Sunday. I will not claim that my prayers alone did it, but this past summer we had the highest summer worship attendance since 2003.

Now God has led me to another challenge. My personal goal for the next 12 months is to double our worship attendance. I will be praying for that and invite you to make it a part of your prayers. Why? Because gathering in worship of the living God is essential to our lives, it is essential to the health of our communities, and it is what God wants from us. Simple as that. God desires and deserves our worship.

In our busy post-modern lives, we must find time for worship that matters. In a moment, the choir is going to sing a song that expresses where I am. I hope it speaks to you. As we give our offerings, listen to the words, "I'm coming back to the heart of worship," and let God speak to you.