

"The Church of the Future: Who Will We Worship?"

Exodus 20:3
September 27, 2009

Mark 10:17-22
St. James UCC

Preached by Rev. Robert Matlack

Good morning! It is good to be here with you this morning, for this hour that we spend together is at the very center, the heart and soul of our life as a church. Between now and mid-November we're going to focus together on the church of the future. We'll do this on several different levels - the whole of the Christian Church - what are some of the trends and issues that we face, and what might they mean for us? The denomination that we're part of - the United Church of Christ - what are those trends and issues that impact us - and how do they impact us as a denomination, and finally - the future of St. James United Church of Christ. What are the issues that we face or might face? What might our future look like, and what are some things that we can start thinking about and working on that will make a difference as we walk into that future?

Now Alva and I don't have a special phone line that God has used to reveal the future to us. In many ways the picture is as cloudy for us as it is for you. However, there is a lot of information out there that we've read, a lot of time that we've spent in thinking about these issues, a lot of prayers lifted up on this topic, and a lot of love for this church, this denomination, this faith - all of which informs how we approach this topic. In addition, we need your feedback - and invite you to talk about these issues with us, and with the members of the Casting Your Net team, because what is most important is not what Alva and I think, but rather how we can start struggling with these issues together as we walk into God's future for this congregation.

I suspect that many of you read the article in that was in the Buffalo News a few weeks ago called "Outside faith, a rising tide of 'nones'." It talked about the growing number of Americans who profess no religious affiliation - the "nones" as they are sometimes called. They have drifted away from organized religion, feeling that it didn't provide answers for them. In some cases because religion seemed to stand in opposition to science. For others because it didn't address the issues they were dealing with - or at least didn't address them in a way that they found helpful. For others, because they lost their faith in God.

At the same time, as we all know, there are other people who are involved in churches, profess an affiliation, but they're Christian when it's convenient, when it helps them to further their real goals, but what's most important in their lives is really something other than God, something other than their faith in God, something other than following God's will for their lives.

It is in that context that we start looking at the Church of Future by posing the question, “Who Will We Worship?”. As our Call to Worship said this morning - it seems obvious, but, when we really look at the issue, is it?

Worship might be defined as: reverent honor and homage paid to God or a sacred personage, or to any object regarded as sacred.

Sacred - worthy of religious veneration or Holy.

Holy - : exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness.

Another way of saying all that might be that we worship what we think is most perfect, most important, most meaningful in our lives. Now in the First Commandment, God said, “Worship no other god but me.” As we know, the Israelite people struggled with that, at times when they weren’t ready to trust in God they made images that they worshiped, they turned to the worship of Baal or Astarte or other false gods. They put their faith and trust in their wealth or their own abilities, and in a variety of other places. As the Bible reminds us, it was tough, very tough for them to consistently place their trust in God. It was tough to really worship God - and by that I mean not just in the words they spoke when they went to the temple, but it was tough to worship God in the way that they lived their lives.

As we all know, the same is true for us as well. There are many temptations out there. For some it’s the lure of wealth - the value of what they own, but in the end, that’s a path that never leads to any satisfaction - you always want more, and it never provides any real security. When we come to the end of this journey through life and death approaches what kind of real security does wealth provide?

In our text from the Gospel of Mark Jesus talked with a man who wanted to inherit eternal life. He worked at obeying all of the commandments, but Jesus saw into this man’s heart, and challenged him - go, sell all that you have and give the money to the poor. For this man’s real trust, his real allegiance, his deepest desire was tied to his wealth, and so in sadness he went away knowing that wealth was not something he was willing to give up, for in the end, his wealth was what he really worshiped.

For others it’s the lure of fame or popularity. For young people we call it peer pressure, and it’s certainly a temptation for them, but the allure doesn’t end there. As people grow older the rush of excitement, the warm feeling of the adoration of others is just as real. Why do you think it’s an advantage for a team like the Buffalo Bills to play at home? They get fired up because tens of thousands of fans are cheering for them! Why do you think politicians or movie stars or musicians love being before large cheering crowds?

You say, Ok, I get that, but that’s not me; but in some ways it might be... The wisdom of society has a strong influence on us and how we live. It’s tough to really go against the flow, to hear how wrong we are, and to persist anyway. It’s much easier to go along,

because nobody questions us when we do.

Now how does this speak about the Church of the Future? Think for a moment. If the church of the future - this church or any other is filled with people who mouth words of praise and commitment to God, but all that commitment gets left behind when they walk out the door - the future is far different than if the church is filled with people who genuinely worship God - not just on Sundays, but also in the way that they live.

You see, to acknowledge God as our Ruler is a radical step, for it means that we no longer set the agenda for our lives, rather God does. It means that we are committed to serving God, a God who is with us all the time.

Among the Jewish people back in the time of Jesus, the fundamental act of worship was the act of assembling. For them the synagogue (for us it's the church) was not a building but a gathering, a congregation of people. Worship was the activity of coming together. They understood religion as something that you don't do by yourself, but rather as something that begins with a move to gather with others, to overcome that solitariness on our faith journeys. That understanding is reflected in Jesus' statement in Matthew 18, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Being a church means that we are a people who assemble together to celebrate what God has done, what God is doing, and what God promises to do in our lives and in the world. We worship because God is God and there are no other gods in our lives. We gather to offer God our thanks and our praise, and to remember together that we are the body of Christ, and that Christ is indeed our head.

On the other hand, when we fail to worship, we move away from God. We drift, or perhaps even run, in the wrong direction. We lose track of who we are, and whose we are. Our lives lose their sense of purpose and direction, and even their very meaning.... All of that happens to us as individuals, but also to us as a church when our worship isn't a genuine offering of ourselves and our lives to God.

You know it's a tough world that we live in. Just open a newspaper, watch the news on TV, or listen to the radio. There's a lot of bad news out there. Drug use, crimes against others, violence, war, terrorism, starvation, cruelty, difficult economic times, and much more are every day occurrences around the world.

We live in a confusing world which pulls us in many directions. The only way that I know of which really helps us to make sense of this gift of life is to gather together regularly to reorient our lives to God, to remember and celebrate that we are the body of Christ, to give thanks to God and to explore and practice together new ways of living and responding as Christians in this confusing world in which we live. Our worship together is not only a priceless gift, but an essential part of who we are as a people of God.

As we start to look at the church of the future, remember that our worship together - in spirit and in truth - is an essential ingredient that will help to determine what that future looks like for St. James United Church of Christ, for the United Church of Christ, and for the whole of the Christian Church.

Amen.