

Slide 1: Why Worship?

Why do we gather to worship together? Why worship services? Why sing together? Pray together? Hear sermons?

- Can't we do all of those things in the privacy of our own homes – better sermons available in books, cds, online?
- Worth all the time and money we put into buildings and staff and volunteers?

Slide 2: God is Worthy

1. Because God commands it – and because God is worthy of our worship. Not about us! “Royal Waste of Time” – focusing on God – we are not the main characters in this story!

Slide 3: Worship Transforms us

2. Because worshipping together transforms us. Corporate worship is full of liturgies, or practices – behaviours – that shape us, form us, remind us who we are, remind us of our commitments and beliefs – songs are confessions/prayers/statements of belief and conviction – Call to worship, corporate prayer – public acts that the more we lean into and repeat, the more they form and transform us from the inside out. Like habits – we choose, we form our habits – and then our habits form us. Not just true of Christian worship services. What we worship changes us. Human beings are worshipping beings. We are liturgical beings. Every person, every culture has all kinds of liturgical practices, repeated individual and group practices that shape us. Think of the liturgies at an NFL football game, and how powerful some of those liturgies are, like standing for the anthem, or kneeling for it. Our cell phones are intentionally designed to cause us to have all kinds of patterns of behaviour that shape us – when that thing dings, we can't help but look – no matter what else we are doing. But Christian worship is about more than just the power of how our worshipping liturgies shape us...

Slide 4: God Transforms us

3. Because through our corporate worship practices GOD SHAPES and transforms us. When we come together we put ourselves in a place, and we engage in practices, where we are inviting God to fill us, to shape us, to encourage and rebuke and challenge and form us. Jesus said in John 15 that apart from him we can do nothing. We need to abide in Jesus – and have him abide in us – and corporate worship is one of the many spiritual practices that form us, not because we earn

credit or merit through our good behaviour, but because they help us abide in Jesus, and give us a framework where Jesus, by his Holy Spirit, can abide in us, and grow his fruit of the Spirit in us.

Slide 5: Vine - Grapes

John 15: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

There are 3 quick and basic observations I want to make from this passage. The first is something I’ve spoken about before, and won’t focus on today – and that is that pruning – cutting away parts of us, which can be as painful as it sounds, whether that is cutting away attitudes like pride, or cutting away false ideas, or cutting away the clutter and busyness so we have time to abide in Jesus – is a big part of how we grow in Christ a bear fruit. The second is what I’ve already said – that the only way we grow, the only way we bear fruit, the only way we are transformed, is by having the life of Jesus, the power of Jesus, flowing in and through us. But the third thing is that vines, whether grapes, or tomatoes, or peas, need something else to flourish. It may be a bit more obvious in the image on the right. They need some kind of supporting structure. Vines need something to grab onto and hang off of so they don’t lay on the ground. They need some kind of lattice or trellis.

Slide 6: Key Principle

The spiritual disciplines involved in corporate worship – like other spiritual disciplines like prayer, devotions, reading the Bible, etc. – are like stakes in the ground with cross pieces, or cross wires, that support the growth God wants to do in us. Spiritual disciplines are a means to an end – not an end

in themselves. They don't make us holy on their own or confer grace in themselves. They put us in a place, give us a structure, where God's Spirit can flow and he can cause us to grow.

Some of you may have heard of an ancient set of disciplines called a rule of life – which is simply a commitment to do a bunch of specific spiritual disciplines. What that word 'rule' really meant in its original form was a 'lattice', or a trellis of life, with each discipline being a stake or a cross-piece providing space and room and support to God to work in us and transform us.

Slide 7 – Lent – Ash Wednesday

Today I want to talk about 3 ancient spiritual disciplines that are very un-Baptist, and very un-modern and western – these are counter-cultural practices in our society and in our church, but they are rooted in biblical teaching, and powerful trellises, or practices, through which God can fill us and form us.

Those 3 practices are Lent, Ash Wednesday, and confession.

If you don't know – Lent begins this week on Ash Wednesday. All three practices remind us of our brokenness, our sinfulness, and our desperate need for God – and all three practices remind us of God's amazing grace and forgiveness. And Jesus cannot abide in us without a deep sense of our need for him – so these are foundational stakes in the ground practices if Jesus is going to abide us, and we in him, so he can grow us and transform us.

Slide 8 - Lent

First – Lent. As Advent is a period of preparation before Christmas, so Lent is a time of preparation before Easter. It's actually 40 days, not including Sundays, of penitence and fasting, of humbling ourselves and remember our great sin and need for Christ's sacrificial death and resurrection.

Lent is a reminder of death and new life. It's a baptismal liturgy or practice, rooted in repentance and forgiveness and transformation. Lent, in preparing for the remembrance of Christ's death and resurrection, is all about remembering our need for death and resurrection – our need to die to self and sin, and to affirm our new life in and obedience to Christ.

Lent isn't a biblical practice or command – you don't have to practice Lent, and if you do, you don't have to practice it a certain way – but Lent is a valuable tool, and valuable practice, that can shape us, and through which

God can shape us, as we practice being poor in Spirit, mourning our sin, and hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

You may know that one of the main things associated with Lent is fasting – which Ben will talk about next Sunday, but fasting is just one practice of repentance, or dying to ourselves in some way. Today I want to focus on the related practices Ash Wednesday confession

Slide 9 – Ash Wednesday

Second – Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday, the seventh Wednesday before Easter Sunday, is the first day of the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday gets its name from the ancient and powerful practice of placing ashes on a Christian worshipper's forehead as a sign of humility before God, a symbol of mourning and sorrow at the death that sin brings in the world.

We are going to do at the end of this service, even though it's Sunday what traditionally happens during Ash Wednesday services – which is- those who come forward have the cross marked out in ashes on their forehead, and the person marking the cross will say, "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Now consider yourself dead to sin and alive in Jesus Christ."

It's a somber practice that helps us reflect on our mortality, our sinfulness, and our need of a saviour

Through this simple act we renew our commitment to daily repentance – to daily dying to self and to sin

And being marked with the cross also is an outward symbol that we are marked with Christ – Christ has died in our place – the risen Christ has conquered death and sin, and we are forgiven and raised with Christ.

Slide 10 - Confession

Third Trellis/practice – Confession.

If Lent is kind of a depressing downer that most Christians don't want to do, and getting a cross made of ashes put on your forehead while hearing 'Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.,' is even more humbling, than confessing our sins to another Christian is even more repugnant. We don't want to confess our sins to another person – and not just because we think that's a Catholic thing – but because it's embarrassing and humiliating and painful, and our culture has taught us to avoid pain at all costs - which is part of the reason we need to do it.

Confessing our sins to another Christian is hard and humiliating, but following Jesus and becoming more like him is not actually about our comfort, and Jesus and the scriptures do not promise a peace that is the absence of suffering or pain, or a joy that comes from the abundance of pleasure. Confessing our sin, like many other aspects of following Jesus, goes against the grain of our culture and is hard to do, but coming to the realization of our idolatry and pride, and other root sins, and confessing them to God and another Christian, is a necessary and powerful part of spiritual transformation. Scripture repeatedly exhorts us to crucify, or put to death, our old sinful nature, and confession, which is a “most profound kind of humiliation,” is a powerful discipline to accomplish that.

Slide 11 – James 5

James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

We’re not only commanded to confess our sins to each other – it’s somehow connected to righteousness, to power in prayer, and to healing. How is that true? One way I know it’s true is that...

The most important healing that can occur is that we truly put off the old, sinful self, and put on the new person in the image of Christ, and contends that confession is critical for that process. We can’t be saved without confession – we also can’t be transformed and grow in Christ without ongoing confession, brokenness, humility, and dependence on God.

Slide 12: Richard Foster

Richard Foster writes that “confession begins in sorrow, but ends in joy,” and tells the story of the first time he confessed his sins to a mentor, and his experience of feeling “set free in ways [he] had not known before.” The Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book, in speaking of the fifth step of confessing to another person, notes that “once we have taken this step, withholding nothing, we are delighted,” and experience peace, the presence of nearness to God.

Confession to one another is so powerful precisely because it breaks the power unconfessed secret sins in our lives. Alcoholics Anonymous notes that one of the benefits of confession to another is the relief from the “terrible isolation [and] loneliness” alcoholics experience, and Bonhoeffer adds that the more lonely and isolated we are, the more destructive and powerful sin is. However, when our hidden feelings, shame, and sin are brought out into the light are confessed, judged, and forgiven, sin loses its

power, which is why confession is the “first step towards transformation.” Bonhoeffer writes that confessing specific sins to another person or group “breaks the circle of self-deception,” which happens when we only confess our sins privately to God, minimize our sin and let ourselves off the hook too easily, which does not lead to victory over sin. When we can confess to another person it confirms and reinforces our honesty both with ourselves and with God.

Larry Crabb notes that deep change and the freedom to be our true selves only happens when we tell our true story, confess who we really are, and receive acceptance from others. In fact, without confession, without being humble and honest and broken with one another, deep fellowship is impossible, which accounts for much of the superficial fellowship many Christians experience in their churches. Bonhoeffer argues that confessing sin to one another allows Christians to ‘break through to community’ because, instead of pretending to be a pious community, where sin is not admitted or acknowledged, we can be free to admit that we are individually and collectively “great, unholy sinner[s],” who God loves, accepts, and forgives.

Slide 13 – Who Should I Confess to?

Who Should I Confess to? A priest? A pastor? We are all priests in God’s kingdom.

Of course, all of this presupposes that we only confess to individuals or small groups of people who will respond to our confession with love and acceptance, not horror or judgmentalism. Dietrich Bonhoeffer declares that only those who live ‘under the cross’ of Jesus, who have “once been appalled by the horror of their own sin ... which nailed Jesus to the cross, will no longer be appalled by even the most serious of sins in another Christian.” Clearly, confessing sin to one another must be reciprocal, at least in the sense that it is only safe to confess sin to those who are aware of their own sin, and can offer the same mercy, grace, and forgiveness which they have received.

I stand with Luther, Bonhoeffer, AA, Larry Crabb – confessing my sin to a person and hearing love, grace acceptance, assurance of forgiveness – powerfully healing... The final aspect of confession to one another that is critical is hearing absolution, the words of forgiveness from God. Martin Luther, in what would surprise most Protestants, taught that the Christian life was unthinkable without confession, and emphasized hearing absolution as being an essential part of confession. The theology of

Christians being able to stand in the place of Christ and offer the words of forgiveness on behalf of Christ is profound and powerful. In John 20:21-23, Jesus gives his followers the power to forgive sins on his behalf, so when believers go to a fellow Christian and confess their sins and hear absolution, it is as if they have gone to and heard forgiveness from Jesus himself. Furthermore, Christians are priests in the new covenant, and as one of the roles of priests in the old covenant was to “bring the forgiveness of sins through the holy sacrifice,” so today Christians can declare forgiveness through the holy and final sacrifice of Jesus

- So whether or not you choose to practice Lent this year, today, this morning - and as part of that we are going to do Ash Wednesday on a Sunday - 3 days before Ash Wednesday – we are giving you the opportunity to practice Ash Wednesday.
- Now, you don't have to come forward and have an ash cross put on your forehead - it is completely optional. And coming forward is not a public admission that you have committed some terrible sin you need cleansing of. It is simply an outward, public act of confession of sin and commitment to Christ. Something I and all of us who follow Christ can and need to do in some form every day.
- So, as we enter into this time of confession and commitment, let us hear the word of the Lord....

Slide 14: Joel 2

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17

Blow the trumpet in Zion;

 sound the alarm on my holy hill.

Let all who live in the land tremble,

 for the day of the Lord is coming.

It is close at hand—

2 a day of darkness and gloom,

 a day of clouds and blackness.

“Even now,” declares the Lord,

 “return to me with all your heart,

 with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

13 Rend your heart

and not your garments.
 Return to the Lord your God,
 for he is gracious and compassionate,
 slow to anger and abounding in love,
 and he relents from sending calamity.
 14 Who knows? He may turn and relent
 and leave behind a blessing—
 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion,
 declare a holy fast,
 call a sacred assembly.
 16 Gather the people,
 consecrate the assembly;
 bring together the elders,
 gather the children and infants
 Let the bridegroom leave his room
 and the bride her chamber.
 17 Let the priests, who minister before the Lord,
 weep between the portico and the altar.
 Let them say, “Spare your people, Lord.
 Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn,
 a byword among the nations.
 Why should they say among the peoples,
 ‘Where is their God?’”
 “Even now,” declares the Lord,
 “return to me with all your heart,
 with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

Slide 15 – Lord Hear our prayer

Let us pray responsively. Whenever I say, “Lord, hear our prayer, please respond with “Have mercy on us, Oh God.”

Let us pray Psalm 51 together.

Lord, hear our prayer - Have mercy on us, Oh God.

Psalm 51:1-17

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

“Lord, hear our prayer.”

Have mercy on us, Oh God.

3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.

4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.

5 Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

6 Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

“Lord, hear our prayer.”

Have mercy on us, Oh God.

8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

9 Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

“Lord, hear our prayer.”

Have mercy on us, Oh God.

11 Do not cast me from your presence

or take your Holy Spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.

14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

“Lord, hear our prayer.”

Have mercy on us, Oh God.

15 Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise.

“Lord, hear our prayer.”

Have mercy on us, Oh God.

Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Saviour, Lord, hear our prayer. Have mercy on us, Oh God.

... Amen

Slide 16 – Remember that you are dust

We are going to have about 10 minutes of silence where I invite you to pray, to confess, to thank God for the gift of forgiveness, and if you wish, to come forward to receive the mark of the cross on your forehead with these ashes, and to hear the words, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Now consider yourself dead to sin and alive in Jesus Christ.”

If you would like to do so, simply come up the centre aisle, and move back to your seats down the outside aisles....

Now hear the good news.

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you^[a] free from the law of sin and death.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:^[a] The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:

Know that in Jesus God embraces you,
God forgives you, and strengthens you
To live an renewed life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Song:

Benediction:

In about 8 weeks we will declare “Christ is risen” and all respond with “He is risen indeed.”

Today we can declare – We are forgiven. – We are forgiven indeed.

God in the grace and peace and assurance of your forgiveness.

And share that grace and peace and forgiveness with others.

We are forgiven – we are forgiven indeed.