

**Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations:  
PASSIONATE WORSHIP**

**Romans 12:1-2**

*Excellent churches have great worship.*

A sermon preached by  
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Last week we began a new sermon series based on a book called *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*.<sup>1</sup> It was written by Bishop Robert Schnase, who is a United Methodist bishop in south Texas. The bishop discovered that there are five aspects of congregational life that make a church highly attractive to people looking for a church: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. If these are done well, people want to come to your church.

Schnase originally wrote the book seven years ago. I liked it and thought it was helpful, and I did a sermon series on it then. But recently he revised and updated the book because in the short space of seven years, so much has changed about the way we do ministry—or the way we *should* do ministry if we want to be fruitful and effective in our mission.

The main distinction that Schnase draws between fruitful ministry now and a few years ago is the location of our ministry. Effective churches used to focus on creating an excellent facility, program and organization so that people would be attracted to come to the church. But even in the last few years, that attraction factor has dwindled. The growth of technology, the ability to afford to go places on the weekend, the abundant activities for young people on weekends, and the lack of cultural support for church have made Sunday morning like any other day in our contemporary society. Does anything close on Sunday anymore except Chick-Fil-A and Hobby Lobby?

So the challenge for the church today is to become more missional. We still have to be attractive and to do what we do with excellence. But we also have to reach out beyond the walls of the church, to engage people where they are, to build relationships that will gain enough trust so that people will then enter our buildings.

When it comes to worship, Schnase gives a bunch of examples of worship that is happening outside the normal sacred spaces of the church—warehouses, parks, shopping malls, even bars. The key factor that characterizes all types of fruitful worship is passion. Excellent worship, wherever it happens, is passionate worship.

What do you think of when you hear the term “passionate worship?” A televangelist with a big show? Africans drumming and dancing? Pentecostals shouting and speaking in tongues? A high mass in a cathedral?

Teenagers at a church camp gathered around a fire and singing with a guitar? Or do you think of First United Methodist Church of Fort Smith? Which of these are passionate worship? All of them can be! Passionate worship has nothing to do with the style of worship. There is as much variety in passionate worship as there is in the people of God. Passionate worship can be traditional, contemporary, liturgical, high, low, gospel, ethnic, you name it. It's not about the style. Passionate worship is about the personal encounter of a church with the presence of the living God. It doesn't matter what vehicle takes you there as long as you arrive.

If you ask some folks, they might tell you that "passionate worship" is an oxymoron. Oxymorons are figures of speech that are inherently contradictory, yet we use them all the time. Some are just part of everyday speech, like "same difference," "clearly confused," or "pretty ugly." Some oxymorons are related to vocations, like "sanitary landfill," "legal brief," or "postal service." Many oxymorons are political in nature: "united nations," "government organization," or "congressional action." And some are religious: "minor miracle" or "holy war."

For some people, "passionate worship" would be an oxymoron. Worship is anything but passionate. It's a time to relax, daydream, catch a few winks. Worship done badly is deadly dull. But that's not the way God wants it done, and that's not the way excellent churches do it. Bishop Schnase says, "Fruitful faith communities practice Passionate Worship. Passionate Worship connects people to God, to one another, and to the world around them."<sup>2</sup>

As long as God has been in relationship with people, there has been worship. This summer, we talked about a couple of great worship Psalms. You can hear the passion in today's Psalm:

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.  
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,  
beholding your power and glory.  
Because your steadfast love is better than life,  
my lips will praise you.*<sup>3</sup>

Today I want to suggest three ways to improve the passion in your worship. If your worship has been unsatisfying, dull, and boring, these strategies will pick it up, no matter who is doing the preaching or singing. If your worship has already been passionate, these principles will pour fuel on your fire!

To develop passionate worship, first **SAY YOUR PRAYERS**. Great worship is undergirded by prayer. We have to be spiritually prepared to worship. Trying to worship without preparing (or “pre-praying”) is like trying to run a race without stretching your muscles first; you could hurt yourself! Do you pray for the pastors, the music ministry, the Sunday Schools, and your own openness to God before you ever show up on Sunday morning? 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. The result will be better worship.

I remember a story about one of the great pastors of the Southern Methodist Church back in the 1920’s (although I can’t recall the pastor’s name). In his years at this church, he had averaged 2 conversions every Sunday for something like 20 years. Another pastor visiting on Sunday morning asked him one time how he achieved this remarkable rate of conversions. Was it his preaching, the music, the beautiful sanctuary, what? The home pastor asked his visitor to follow him. Underneath the sanctuary, there was a large room. In this room there were about 80 men praying. They were praying for the worship service that morning. The pastor explained, “When these men go up and sit in the sanctuary, they are so warm with the Holy Spirit that they will thaw out any frozen heart that sits close to them.”

When we pray before worship and pray during worship that God will enter this place and melt the hearts of God’s people, then the spiritual warmth in the sanctuary will ignite the passion of the congregation. And fruit will grow.

Secondly, to have passionate worship, **KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE**. I’m not talking about marketing surveys here. We have a tendency, in our consumer culture, to view the worship service like religious entertainment. God is the producer; he is in control of the process. The pastors, musicians, ushers, and others who move around are the actors, and the congregation is the audience. Some traditions even call their worship space an auditorium.

The only problem with that scenario is that it creates a passive (not a passionate) congregation. It leads to a consumer mentality about worship—worship reviews, critiques of the performance of worship by the actors on the stage. “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.”

If we’re not careful, we end up with the attitude reflected in the Dennis the Menace cartoon from several years ago. Walking out of church, Dennis says to the pastor, “Pretty good show for a quarter!”

Passionate worship, on the other hand, is directed at God. The pastors, musicians and others are the producers, in that we manage the process. The people in the congregation are the actors in the worship drama. The audience of our worship is God. Passionate worship is directed toward our heavenly Father. We do this for God. We have an “audience of One.” And the only ultimate criterion of good worship is that it please our Audience.

Years ago Bill Moyers, now famous as a fixture on PBS, was press secretary to President Lyndon Johnson. Moyers is also an ordained minister, so once at a state dinner, LBJ had Bill Moyers say the invocation. As he was praying, the President interrupted him and said, “Speak up, Moyers, I can’t hear you!”

To which Bill Moyers replied, “With all due respect, Mr. President, I wasn’t talking to you.”<sup>4</sup> In passionate worship, our audience is God. It’s not about us.

The third key to passionate worship is to **ENGAGE YOUR HEART**. Every worship service needs to address three areas of our lives—our intellect, our emotions, and our action. A good worship service intrigues the mind, inspires the heart, and invites us to do something. Methodists are generally a pretty sedate group. Over the years we became sophisticated, and our worship became intellectual. I’m not against thinking about our faith. But too often we leave the heart out of our worship, and that’s the passionate part.

It was not like that in the beginnings of Methodism. John Wesley constantly had to defend himself against charges of “enthusiasm” or rampant emotionalism in religious services. The early American

Methodists were called “shouting Methodists” because of their exuberance in worship.

In fact, if you will open your hymnal, even before the Table of Contents, we have John Wesley’s instructions for passionate worship: “Sing lustily and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. ...Above all, sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself or any other creature.”<sup>5</sup>

I’m not saying that passionate worship is always emotional. But I am saying that passionate worship has to engage the heart as well as the mind. Bishop Schnase writes in his book: “Worship should express our devotion, our honor and love of God. *Passionate* describes an intense desire, an ardent spirit, strong feelings, and the sense of heightened importance. *Passionate* speaks of an emotional connection that goes beyond intellectual consent.”<sup>6</sup> Does that describe your heart for worship?

Matt Redman is a contemporary Christian songwriter who has reached people around the world with his worship music for over twenty years. In the 1990’s, he was leading worship in his church in England. The band was good, but the worship was flat and uninspiring. In fact, the band was very proud of how good they were. So one day their pastor, Mike Pilavachi, confronted the band and declared a season of no music. They would sing *a cappella* until they got the right spirit back in their church. His point was that they had lost their way in worship, and the way to get back to the heart would be to strip everything away. He wanted to challenge his church to be producers of worship, not just consumers.

Insulted, all the band members left the church—all except Matt Redman. Instead, he looked deep inside himself and came up with a song which has become one of the best-loved songs in contemporary worship. It’s called “The Heart of Worship,” and some of the lyrics say, “When the music fades, all is stripped away, and I simply come; longing just to bring something that’s of worth that will bless your heart. I’m coming back to the heart of worship, and it’s all about you, all about you, Jesus. I’m sorry, Lord, for the thing I’ve made it; it’s all about you, it’s all about you, Jesus.”<sup>7</sup> That season of engaging the heart and doing some soul-searching changed Matt Redman’s life and propelled his music career.

Passionate worship will **CHANGE YOUR LIFE**. If you say your prayers, direct your worship to God as your audience, and engage your heart, something's going to change. Bishop Schnase calls passionate worship the "optimum environment for conversion."<sup>8</sup> Do you know anybody that was ever converted outside of a moment of public or private worship? This is our practical challenge. When we worship God in spirit and in truth, we will be moved to do something—to repent and confess our sins, to accept Jesus Christ, to give of ourselves, to serve other people, to study more deeply, to engage in ministry. This is what Paul was talking about when he wrote to the Romans: "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed...*"<sup>9</sup> When we are being transformed by passionate worship, every day and every place becomes a sanctuary—a place of worship—as we live prayerfully, playing out our lives before our divine audience, our hearts engaged in love for Christ.

That's why we can worship missionally. We not only enhance the quality to attract more worshippers and eventually make more disciples, but we also multiply the opportunities so people can worship in more places to connect with God in more ways. Moving forward, I think you'll see more missional worship from First United Methodist Church.

As we think about passionate worship today, let me close with an incident that happened to a friend of mine. Norman Neaves, a United Methodist pastor in Oklahoma, and his wife Kipp were leading a group from their church on a tour of England a few years ago, and one of the stops was St. Paul's Cathedral in London. It is an awesome structure, even more beautiful on the inside that it is impressive on the outside. As Kipp was standing there admiring the beautiful artwork, she found herself standing next to an elderly British gentleman. He was looking up at the magnificent dome of St. Paul's and tears were running down his wrinkled cheeks. After a moment he spoke these heartfelt words: "I live less than twenty miles from here, and yet this is the first time I've ever seen this cathedral since I moved here over 50 years ago!" He just could not imagine how beautiful and inspiring it really was, and so for 50 years he had denied himself that exquisite experience, even though he was so close.<sup>10</sup>

Friends, don't deny yourself the experience of passionate worship. You're probably not that far away. Say your prayers. Know your Audience. Engage your heart. Encounter the presence of God. Change your life. And bear fruit for the Kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Schnase, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 63:1-3.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.faithandleadership.com/richard-mouw-prayer-beijing>.

<sup>5</sup> *United Methodist Hymnal*, p. vii.

<sup>6</sup> Schnase, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Matt Redman, "The Heart of Worship," Kingsway's Thankyou Music, 1999. Story from Jack Hayford, *Midday Connection* (11-28-01), and Crosswalk.com.

<sup>8</sup> Schnase, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 12:1-2.

<sup>10</sup> From a sermon by Dr. Norman Neaves.