

**A Message Shared by the Rev. Gregory J. Rupright
at
Rutherford Congregational Church, UCC
on
March 27, 2011 – 3rd Sunday in Lent**

Message Title: “Spirit and Truth”

Key Scripture Text: John 4:5-30, 39-42

Prayer for Illumination

Holy Spirit, you come to us in ordinary places with extraordinary truth. Quench our thirst, we pray, with Living Water. May words of long ago lead us to encounter the Word made flesh. Inspire us to live the Good news of your loving provision for our lives. We would reach out in service to this world or yours, that all may come to know the peace of deeply grounded faith. Amen.

At the first church I served, I was given the task of calling on a longtime church member who rarely came to church. During the visit, I asked him why he rarely came to church. In response to my question, he said, “I don’t go to church that often. Frankly, I am one of those people who believes that I can worship God just as well on the golf course as I can in church.”

Another person from another church I served was more than candid. She said, “Pastor, I haven’t been to church lately because my church is now on television. I feel more close to Jesus watching my religious TV programs than I do sitting with those hypocrites at your church.”

More recently, while eating at a diner, I overheard a conversation between a forties something married couple. She said, “Honey, why won’t you ever go to church with me? Don’t you believe in God?” He responded, “Sweetheart, I love you. But how many times have I told you? I practice my faith, but more in my heart, not in a church.”

The three examples that I have just lifted up deal with various people’s attitudes toward the worship of God. And so, I want us to ask ourselves this morning, what is true worship? And where does the true worship of God take place? I think our Gospel lesson answers these questions. True worship is “in spirit and in truth.” To worship “in spirit” is dynamic and energizing. To worship “in truth” is to worship Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life. True worship “in spirit and in truth” is a gift of the living Christ who meets us both in John’s Gospel and in all our times of worship, whenever and wherever and however that may be.

Our Gospel lesson tells us that at midday Jesus begins a conversation with a Samaritan woman while she draws water at the town well. It is a strange conversation for many reasons. This woman is a Samaritan, and as John explains, “Jews have no dealings with Samaritans” (John 4:9b). There was a great rift between Jews and Samaritans, a division that was centered upon a dispute about where was the best place to worship God. The Jews said that the best place to worship was the Jerusalem temple.

The Samaritans believe that the best place to worship was on Mt. Gerizim. Shortly after Jesus engages the Samaritan woman in conversation, she brings up the dispute that Jews had with Samaritans over where was the best place to worship. Perhaps she expects that this will be the end of the conversation. Jesus, a Jew, will tell her that she has it all wrong and that the place where she thinks God is most present, at Mt. Gerizim, is all wrong.

Or maybe she thinks that Jesus will give her a good theological argument in which Jesus may convince her that the true place to find God actually is in Jerusalem rather than Mt. Gerizim. After all, the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim had been destroyed for well over a century. Perhaps she is secretly hoping that Jesus will convince her that the temple in Jerusalem is a fitting and appropriate place for her to worship.

But Jesus surprises her by responding, “I tell you, there will be a day when people will worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23a).

There are those two words again. Spirit and truth? What is that suppose to mean? In one sense, it may sound like Jesus is merely stating the obvious. Of course, worship should be in “spirit and truth.” Worship ought to be spiritual. It ought to be appropriately religious and uplifting. And of course, worship ought to be about truth.

But Jesus, as is usual in the Gospel of John, is doing much more than stating the obvious. He is saying more than we ought to mean by the words “spirit” and “truth.”

Let’s consider what the word Spirit means in the Bible. In the first chapter of Genesis when God began creating the world, we are told that the Spirit of God “hovered” over the dark waters and brought forth life. The word “hover” brings to mind a helicopter sweeping down and hovering over a location. A better translation of this Hebrew word might be “brooded” over the waters. The Spirit of God is that which brings forth something out of nothing, that which brings life out of death. The Spirit is generative, procreative, life-giving.

In the New Testament, the word for “Spirit” is the Greek word, *pneuma*. *Pneuma* means simply “wind.” We heard that message last Sunday in Jesus’ meeting with Nicodemus. It’s like Jesus is saying, “The day is coming when those who worship will worship in the wind and in truth.”

The wind is air in motion. Therefore, this implies that the Spirit is God in motion. God is not static but is movement. The Spirit of God brooded over the waters of creation and set the world in motion.

Do you see what I'm getting at? Worship is not so much a place, a location, as it is wherever and whenever the Spirit of God blows upon us. That is why it is not quite right to say, "I am going to come to worship this morning."

You get worship when you have people blown together in one place by the Holy Spirit of God. People blown in from the four corners of the earth. Worship is also a matter of people in motion. People not only standing up and sitting down, kneeling, processing, passing the peace, recessing, but worship is also whenever and wherever God moves a people from place to place. When we volunteer at the KIP Center or Family Promise, we are worshipping. When we volunteer at Starfish or the Rutherford Food Pantry, we are worshipping. When we work at the Easter Egg Factory, we are worshipping. When God blows people from one location to another, that's worship.

As Jesus told Nicodemus, in the conversation immediately before that with the woman at the well, the Spirit of God, the Wind of God, is free. It "blows where it will."

Therefore, worship has always got to have some movement in it, a sense of being dislodged, blown to and fro. Worship is not so much worshipping at Jerusalem, or on Mt. Gerizim, or even here in our church.

Worship is whenever and wherever the Holy Spirit of God blows through, blows strange people together, moves you to some place you wouldn't be had you not been given the gift of the Holy Spirit. That's what worship in "spirit" is all about.

What about worship in "truth"? John's Gospel has a very particular view of truth. In our definitions, truth tends to be an idea, a proposition, some statement that we make – "this idea is true," we say. But in John's Gospel, Jesus makes statements like, "I am the truth." Now the truth about God has become a person, has become personal. God is no longer an abstraction, a vague generality. God has a face and a name – Jesus the Christ.

Later in the conversation, after Jesus has told the woman that there will be a day when true worshipers will worship in spirit and truth, she says to Jesus, "I know that Messiah is coming . . . When Messiah comes, he will proclaim all things to us" (John 4:25). Then Jesus says to her directly, "I am he, the One who is speaking to you" (John 4:26). That is, if she really wants to encounter the truth, she has only to open her eyes and see Truth in conversation with her, Truth sitting next to her.

Every time Christians gather for worship, blown in by the Wind of God, we believe that we are able to worship in this "spirit and truth." We build our beautiful churches. We bolt down the pews to the floor, in a vain attempt to keep everything fixed. We have the best blend of traditional and contemporary music. But in the end, we don't produce worship. We don't make worship. We don't perform worship. Worship is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Worship occurs in those delicious moments when the Spirit of God blows through our dead, dark, infertile world and brings life – just like in Genesis 1.

True worship occurs when we are encountered by the Truth, by Jesus, who tells us to worship God in spirit and truth. Worship means what Jesus says it means.

When people are encountered by Jesus and the Gospels, they have a variety of emotions. Sometimes they feel a sense of peace, but sometimes they feel a sense of fear. The woman at the well felt both affirmed and engaged by Jesus, and terribly bewildered and confused by Jesus. The point of worship is not just to come together and have a sense of collected peace. Nor is worship just a time to come and feel better about our problems, or to receive answers to all our questions. Worship “in truth” is whenever and wherever we are encountered by Jesus, and it means accepting whatever gift the Risen Christ has to give us.

It is quite a challenge to worship as Christians. But the challenge is not so much that we have got to concentrate and try hard to sincerely worship God. The challenge is the challenge that God takes on in becoming flesh, in coming to us, just like Jesus came to the woman at the well. And whenever God comes to us, and wherever, and however God comes to us, then it is worship in “spirit and truth.”

And though it pains me to admit it, the guy who says that he can worship God just as well on a golf course as he can in a church, or the woman who says that she experiences worship while watching a religious program on TV, or the middle-aged man who tells his wife that he practices his faith, but more in his heart, not in a church, are, in a way, correct. Because if worship is “in spirit and in truth,” then it is whenever, wherever, and however the Risen Christ appears to us.

Of course, my hope and expectation is that the fullest of worship, in “spirit and truth,” occurs best here. Here when a resurrected Body of Christ, our church, gathers, and we dare to be engaged in conversation and revelation by Jesus.

Prayer for Blessing on the Word

Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us.
Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us.
Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us. Amen.