

“Orienteering”

“Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29-30).

Mark 12:28-34 ¹

Back in the dark ages—in the long eons before there were GPS satellites—one of the primary means of navigation was the magnetic compass. And today, even with GPS satellites, Navy ships still have magnetic compasses—several of them—as backups.

I was never much of a Boy Scout, but I did develop some knowledge of how to use a map and a compass, and the Navy added to that knowledge. I much prefer to use a GPS; but if something ever happens to those satellites, a magnetic compass may be a very handy thing to have.

You may know that there’s even a popular sport called “orienteering” that uses maps and magnetic compasses for land navigation races. Orienteering is kind of like geocaching, but harder.² I’ll come back to that later.

These days, a high percentage of automobiles—and probably all of the new ones—have GPS navigation capabilities. Some years ago, a woman bought a car that had early capabilities of that sort, but, like many people, she didn’t take the time to read the manual.

The first time she drove the car in the rain, she turned a knob she thought would start the windshield wipers, but the wipers didn’t start. Instead, a message flashed across the dash: “Drive car through 360 degrees.” The woman had no idea what that meant, and so when she got home she read that part of the manual.

She learned that while trying to turn on the windshield wipers she had turned off the car’s internal compass, and the car had lost its sense of direction. To correct the problem, the car had to be driven in a full circle, pointed north, and then the compass had to be reset. Our focus this morning is on a similar “reset” experience, which for today, I’m calling “Orienteering.”

This is actually the first of a series of five sermons, and I need to set the stage a little bit. You’ve heard me say many times that I believe God is doing two things on Planet Earth. The first thing God is doing is using the experiences of our lives to so shape our character that we’ll be willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with God; and the second thing God is doing builds upon the first, which is the project of joining our lives together in a fabric of spiritual community that only God can weave—the firstfruits of the New Creation.

Everything we do in our Fellowship is intended to support and to facilitate the achievement of one or both of these goals, and our church is organized around a five-part structure to achieve this. I’m sure you remember that these five areas are **WORSHIP**, **FELLOWSHIP**, **DISCIPLESHIP**, **MINISTRY**, and **MISSION**.

Many people—and I’m among them—find it helpful to remember these five areas using the image of a baseball diamond, where **Worship** is represented by the pitcher’s mound, **Fellowship** by first base, **Discipleship** by second base, **Ministry** by third base, and **Mission** by home plate.

I also find it helpful to remember these five aspects of our life together using the words **WORSHIP**, **CONNECT**, **GROW**, **SERVE**, and **GO**. You know these. Let’s say them together:

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 8, 2018.

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orienteering>

WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO.

Although we use this structure day in and day out, it's been five years since we've looked at these "Five Things Disciples Do Every Week" on Sunday morning, and so we're going to look at each of these in turn over the next several weeks, with Worship being our focus this morning.

I'm sure you know that worship is both an individual and a shared experience. It is both public and private. While our worship is much larger than what happens in this room—indeed, our whole lives are our worship (Romans 12:1-2)—what happens here as we gather together is unique and special. Much of what I'll say this morning applies to both aspects of worship, but I'm going to focus on "corporate worship"—what we do here together.

You probably know that the word "corporate" comes from the Latin word that means "body," and it refers to our worship together as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). Corporate worship is simply the gathering of our personal worship into a shared experience—into "Body Life."

Corporate worship is vitally important for our spiritual growth. While we can certainly worship in solitude, for most of us, what shapes us the most is consistent participation with the people of God in corporate worship week after week and year after year.

To return to the baseball metaphor, in baseball, if the pitcher isn't putting balls into play, nothing else happens; and in our life together, if God isn't empowering us through worship, nothing else happens—at least nothing that really matters.

You've probably discovered that it's quite possible to be very, very busy in our work in the church and for there still to be no "Fire." All the other dimensions of our life together are empowered by worship. Worship is the Key. It is the Source of Fire.

Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase has written two wonderful books about worship, and he points out that "God uses worship to transform lives, heal wounded souls, renew hope, shape decisions, provoke change, inspire compassion, and bind people to one another." Through Spirit-filled worship, God draws us to Jesus, deepens our relationship with Jesus, and over time, transforms us into the character of Jesus."³

Becoming "like Jesus" is both crucial and wonderful, because Jesus taught us that God the Father is like Jesus, the Son. God is not only *like* Jesus, but God is *exactly* like Jesus, and has *always* been exactly like Jesus (John 10:30,14:9). This is an absolutely crucial truth, and much of what Jesus taught about worshiping God can be inferred from what He said in two encounters in the Gospels. The first encounter is the one we usually call "The Woman at the Well," in John 4.

When the Samaritan woman tried to debate with Jesus about worship at Jacob's Well, Jesus didn't get into an argument. He simply told her the truth about worship. And it seems to me that His answer must form both the anchor and the compass for all of our worship discussions, whether ancient and modern. Here's what He told her: "*An hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth. Yes, the Father wants such people to worship him. **God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and in truth***" (John 4:23-24).

³ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), pp. 33-34. See also Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010).

In another conversation, Jesus spoke about the necessary balance between old things and new things in our faith and in our worship. When He was criticized for talking about God in new ways that had not been customary in the past, Jesus responded: “*No one tears a patch from a new garment and puts it on an old garment. Otherwise, not only will he tear the new, but also the piece from the new garment will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins, it will spill, and the skins will be ruined. No, new wine is put into fresh wineskins. And no one, after drinking old wine, wants new, because he says, ‘The old is better’*” (Luke 5:36-39).

If we apply these comments to this morning’s subject, it seems to me that Jesus has given us four basic principles for worship. Let’s look at them very briefly.

First, worshipping God “**in Spirit**” refers to our active, personal, meaningful participation in worship. In this morning’s text, Jesus reminded us that the most important commandment is that we—all of us—love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Worship is an *active* experience, not a passive one. Worship is a *verb*, not a noun. **Jesus’ first principle for worship is that each of us has an active part to play in worship, a part that is ours alone.**

Jesus also told the woman that we must worship God “**in truth.**” When He prayed for His disciples in the Upper Room on the night that He was betrayed, Jesus asked His Father to “*Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth*” (John 17:17). In the New Testament, God’s “Word” refers both to Jesus and to the Bible. **Jesus’ second principle for worship is that worship must focus on both Jesus, God’s Living Word, and on the Bible, God’s written Word, if it is to be Christian worship.**

Jesus’ third principle has to do with “**new wine.**” The fact of the matter is that almost everything we do in worship is a matter of tradition and custom, not something prescribed in the Bible. While our traditions do have their place, they also can be dangerous. Jesus warned the religious folk of His day, “*You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!*” (Mark 7:9).

My friends, God is always at work creating the new from the old, bringing in the Eternal Kingdom in ways that we cannot always predict, often have not imagined, and sometimes in ways that we ourselves would not have chosen.⁴ **Jesus’ third principle for worship is that we must always leave room for God to “do a new thing.”** After all, God is God, and we are not.

Finally, Jesus *affirmed* the “old” even as He *revealed* the “new.” Jesus didn’t tell the teachers of the Law to throw the Law away. He told them that they should become His disciples, following Him to whom the Law pointed, and thus becoming able to bring “out of the storehouse the new teachings as well as the old.”

The old and familiar has its place. That which is familiar helps us to stay anchored in those parts of our stories that have been most important for us. C.S. Lewis liked to say that the familiar predictability of the liturgy (he was an Anglican) makes it possible for us to relax into God’s Presence and to listen to God’s Voice.

Jesus’ fourth principle for worship is that our openness to God’s doing a New Thing doesn’t mean that we reject all that has come before. We honor the old for its function in preparing us for the present moment in which we meet God. Dag Hammarskjöld put these last two principles very nicely when he said, “*For all that has been, thanks! For all that will be, Yes!*”

⁴ Isaiah 43:19; Revelation 21:5

Bishop Schnase reminds us that “Many of life’s most critical questions cannot be answered through more information, with better science, or by linear modes of intellectual exploration. Questions of meaning, purpose, love, suffering, connection, life, death, and hope require a more elastic and searching form of knowledge. Spiritual insight, while as true and eternal as the laws of gravity, requires grasping certainties that are not describable so much by fact or science as by experience, trust, and grace.

“Practicing worship is like learning other languages that open us to the full resources of the spiritual life. God’s transcendent love pulls us out of ourselves, stretches us, and takes us beyond where we could possibly arrive on our own. Realities beyond conscious reach become accessible to us.”⁵ More than this, “a sustained pattern and practice of worship lends coherence, meaning, depth, and connection to our lives. **Worship reconfigures our interior lives and aligns us with the Life of Christ.**”⁶ And that brings us back to the idea of orienting and aligning—that “orienting” thing.

Time gets away, but I’d like to briefly suggest another five-part image about worship: worship **RE-CENTERS** us, **RE-MEMBERS** us, **REALIGNS** us, **RESHAPES** us, and **RECONSTRUCTS** our pathway to God.

Weekly corporate worship and daily private worship allow God to do at least five things in our lives that badly need doing. The first thing worship does for us is to **re-center** or to “**reboot**” our spirits so that our lives get a fresh chance to work as they were designed to work. Much as computers need to be rebooted from time to time in order to clear out the clutter and errors that accumulate with use, our spiritual lives need rebooting, too. Worship does that for us.

Worship is how we place ourselves in the most advantageous place for engaging God’s Spirit. While God is present in all of life, it is through worship that we most purposefully search for God and become most acutely aware of God’s presence. Worship represents a regular appointment with the sacred, a planned encounter, a scheduled time and place to connect.

Worship brings us back to Center. We arrive with souls prepared, minds ready, and hearts open, and our anticipation makes worship different from other times. We could choose to spend this time doing many other things; but instead we’ve decided that our relationship with God is of such importance that we’ve set those other things aside to attend to this central, crucial, life-giving relationship.⁷

The second thing corporate worship does is to **re-member** or reconnect ourselves to the Body of Christ and to each other, joining our lives once more with others who follow Jesus. Worship reconnects us to God and to other people who also choose to orient their lives toward God. Worship reminds us that we belong to God and to one another, and this sense of belonging is essential for our spiritual well-being. In worship, we bind ourselves to one another and to God so that we don’t become “unbound” or “unhinged” during the challenging times that come to all of us every week.⁸

The third thing corporate worship does for us is to **realign** our spiritual lives so that we’re better aligned with the Life of our Lord. We become distracted by the multitude of cares and worries and responsibilities that life brings to us each week, and, like those children’s toys that create pictures with iron filings and magnets, we need the realignment of “heaven’s magnetism”

⁵ Schnase, *Living*, pp. 47-48.

⁶ Schnase, *Fruitful*, p. 45.

⁷ Schnase, *Living*, p. 49.

⁸ Schnase *Living*, p. 50.

to get the various dimensions of our lives all going in the same direction again. We need our compasses reset.

Fourth, like the clay on Jeremiah's famous potter's wheel, God **reshapes** our souls through worship in ways that lead to abundant, joyful Life (Jeremiah 18:1-10). Bishop Schnase noted that "God uses worship to crack open closed hearts, reconcile broken relationships, renew hope, restrain harmful arrogance, heal wounded souls, shape personal decisions, interrupt destructive habits, stimulate spiritual growth, and transform our lives."⁹

And fifth, through all of these together, God uses worship to **reconstruct** the pathway that allows God's healing and transforming power to flow into our lives and through our lives into the world.¹⁰ Worship helps us move beyond haphazard and harried lives toward lives that are focused, connected, and grounded in what really matters.¹¹

Worship connects us with that which is truly Real. As a result of worship, we receive thoughts, convictions, and insights that weren't there before. Beyond our conscious awareness, something below the surface goes on, something real and life-changing.¹² The truth of the matter is that the experience of worship has much about it that is Mystery, and while we sometimes wrestle with that Mystery, most of the time we simply welcome it and embrace it.¹³

My friends, God invites us to worship "in Spirit and in Truth" because God knows that it is in worship that we most fully and completely experience our need for relationship with God. It is in worship that we confess our brokenness, receive God's forgiveness, are released from our guilt, and nourish our lives with God's Abundant Life.¹⁴

Now I can't speak for you, but I know that my life needs frequent rebooting, re-membering, realignment, reshaping, and reconstructing, and those are some of the things that, together with passionate, grateful love, bring me regularly to public and private worship. I don't do all this just because it's my job. I do it because I love it . . . *and* because I need it. Worship provides a way by which we find God and let ourselves be found by God, and in the process, we find ourselves at last.¹⁵

And now, as we conclude our worship for this morning, I invite you to join me in the responsive affirmations of the liturgy's *Sursum Corda*, which is Latin for "lift up your hearts." These words, used in the liturgies of the Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox churches, express the longing of our souls in this sin-torn world for the wholeness of the New Heaven and the New Earth, which are a-borning, even now:¹⁶ *Sursum Corda* goes like this:

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

⁹ Schnase, *Living*, p. 46.

¹⁰ Schnase, *Living*, p. 51.

¹¹ Schnase, *Living*, p. 49.

¹² Schnase, *Living*, p. 54.

¹³ Schnase, *Living*, p. 57.

¹⁴ Schnase, *Living*, p. 51.

¹⁵ Schnase, *Living*, p. 50.

¹⁶ www.reformedworship.org/article/december-2006/lift-your-hearts; the words date at least from A.D. 215, in Hippolytus's *Apostolic Traditions*.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

“Yes, it is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, God, our Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. And therefore, O Lord, we praise You, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels, with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with all those in every generation who have looked to You in hope, to proclaim with them Your glory, in their unending hymn: ‘Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, Heaven and earth are full of Your glory!’”¹⁷

And all God’s people said, “AMEN”!

¹⁷ <https://www.bcponline.org/HE/he2-altgt.html>