

Thoughts on Worship.

by Banning | May 5, 2014

Worship.

I hear the term worship thrown around a lot, as does anyone within a church. Sometimes there is the feeble attempt that seeks to remind people that worship is more than just music, and yet we reference the music section of the service as “worship.” Oh the irony of it all. Worship, as it is to me, contains a definition that is constantly morphing and growing like an organism. So as it is today, what is worship to me?

I have heard it said, and am completely guilty of saying the following phrase: “Man, worship was really good/terrible today.” During “worship” sets I typically find myself judging the music itself too often. As a semi-musician I feel like I have some right to an opinion about what is “proper worship” and what is not. I do acknowledge that as Pastors and Ministers it is our job to continue evolving and re-contextualizing ourselves to meet the needs of the modern generations, but at the same time I also struggle with the state of my own heart regarding what worship is reduced to. I’ve compartmentalized worship in my own life to the point that I almost don’t think about it because I know I’m going to get it every Sunday for 20 minutes. Is that what worship really has become to me? 20 minutes? I think I subconsciously attempt to “worship harder” so that my experience can carry me throughout my week without ever really knowing what “the experience” is supposed to be. Closed eyes? Raised hands when the right song is played? Open palms when a convicting song is played? Or how about the worship happy feet that most people have? You know, the way your body moves when you “enter in to the kingdom?” MUSICAL worship has a way of drawing us into a sort of unawareness of our surroundings as we seek to focus only on the face of God, or contemplate some deep reality we are each facing. I know I kid about the obvious aspects of worship, but I do not mean to offend by suggesting that if you kick your feet around to the beat of the song, or let your hand go limp when you raise it like Kobe Bryant does when he sinks a game winner (by the way Kobe, you haven’t done that in a while). What I am saying is that there are these sort of motions we go through that can be a very good thing for us, but also leave me wanting something more. Worship must be more than just an electrical outlet for the human spirit.

There is this idea that things like worship or prayer are these sort of charging ports that fill us up with what we need to make it through the day, or week, or whatever. It’s the classic, “You can’t pour out unless you’re getting poured into.” I have a real issue with that. The reason I have an issue with that is that it allows us to believe that we still possess the ability to do much of anything good on our own. “Thanks for the recharge Holy Spirit, see you next weekend.” God is not a gas station. And further, His presence in and around your life is not contingent on whether or not the band is playing the latest worship song from Hillsong. He is bigger than that. He HAS to be.

I think that there are much more refined Christians than me who can come into the presence of God at any time, with whatever they are dealing with, and find a place in worship where they are almost tangibly lifted up from where they were to where they need to be. I struggle with that discipline. The people I really admire who seem to possess this ability don't view God as the spiritual gas station, but in "worship" are drawn into His presence and then sometimes literally lay down their burdens before Him. One of the most tangible moments I've ever experienced where the Spirit of God moved as I saw someone in deep pain be drawn into the presence of God in worship took place at one of the most sorrowful times of my life.

I received a phone call early one morning from my close friend's wife. It was random that she would call me at all, and the fact that it was so early urged me to not ignore it and return to slumber. When I answered, she sounded a little frantic as she explained to me that her husband, one of my best friends, was in an accident and taken to the hospital with some sort of lower body injury. She didn't know much, but she said she was told it may be his pelvis. Without hesitation, I just headed down to the hospital. He was the kind of person I loved so much that even going to see him in his recovery bed to show my support and make fun of him was worth calling in and canceling my meetings that day. As I drove down to the hospital I called my brother to let him know and then began to think about what this injury meant for my friend. The plot twist in this story is that his wife was due ANY DAY with their firstborn son. I had been anticipating seeing this strong man who I looked up to so much as a dad. The thoughts started to come to my mind about what life would be like for him as a new father with a broken pelvis. I actually physically began weeping profusely on the freeway because I knew how difficult he would have taken not being able to work and provide for his family in the midst of the injury. I imagined him in a wheel chair holding his baby boy. I even mourned over the difficulty all of the little things would be for him until he was healed (showering, changing the baby, etc...). When I arrived at the hospital and saw my friend's wife, there was some confusion as to what was going on. The hospital staff was really trying to figure out where he specifically was and what needed to be done. After a while of confusion we were taken to a waiting area. More friends started showing up. No news had come about our broken friend yet, but people loved him so much that they just wanted to come and show their support like I did. They finally took back his wife, then his family to see him. After about 10 minutes a nurse came back out to get the peanut gallery and walk us back to see him. I was thinking about how I was going to poke fun at him, and preparing myself for the surely humorous things he would say about the whole incident himself. As we were walking with the nurse (it was myself, my brother, and another friend), the brother of our friend who had come out with the nurse to get us uttered as if his voice were traveling over speed bumps: "It's not good." A moment or two elapsed that seemed like four eternities. What did that mean? What happened? Is he going to lose a limb? Then he spoke up again, "He's not going to be with us anymore."

I took just about everything I had to get down the short stretch of hall we still had to walk until we arrived at the waiting room near his body, and then the three of us grown

men ventured into whatever corner we could find and wept like I'm sure we've never wept before. The piercing pain I felt in that moment was so dramatic that even retelling the story brings heavy tears to my eyes. I've never lost anything so valuable before. The circumstances were so devastating it seemed impossible. This any day father, gone. I've never been more distraught that I was during the coming weeks.

So what does this have to do with worship? I'll tell you. The day of his memorial service came, and I had been preparing myself for what was coming. His incredible wife planned an awesome day of celebration in honor of his life which included a memorial service, and a reception complete with donuts and root beer (his favorite). The memorial service was like ripping a barely formed scab off of a wound that should have been amputated. I was seeing pictures of my friend, videos, listening to incredible stories, and trying my best just to get to the end of the service.

My friend was a big fan of hymns, so his wife asked that hymns be played at the service. After the memorial video was played, the band got up and began to play. I have no clue what the song that was played was specifically, but I remember that the audience was almost non responsive. It was as if the whole room was paralyzed with the same pain that I was. As the song played on, I was so confused about what to do. So much pain, so much emptiness, what is worship supposed to be for me now?

I will never forget what happened next. In the front of the audience, during the chorus of the song, a woman and her newborn child stood and entered into worship. It was like you could see the gates of heaven open up and the two of them walk right in. It was the wife of the deceased friend and their child. This moment in my life, and I think maybe for everyone else who was there, is one that will go on as my closest encounter with what heaven must be like. I was immediately penetrated by the presence of God, that I couldn't do anything except stand and join them in worship.

I don't like thinking of God as some good luck charm, or some sword that we can wield to accomplish what we want. I know there is power in Christ, but for me the power I prefer is not the one that demands anything from God. The power I prefer is the power of knowing I am impossibly inadequate. I caught myself "worshipping" the other day. In the moment I wasn't just singing some song or doing some worship regimen, I genuinely longed to spend time with God. I longed to gaze upon His words, to contemplate the things He's been trying to teach me for so long. I desired to be the person I've always known God is trying to make me into. It was like my whole being, for a quick moment, was in rhythm with God's eternal heartbeat. And I realized soon after, THIS is what worship truly is for me. It is life in rhythm with God, aware of His greatness and unaware of my own. I find myself there randomly, I found myself there at my friends memorial service, and I found myself there the other day. It doesn't matter what you are enduring, be your burden heavy or light, being drawn to God is what worshipping Him truly is. I didn't feel miraculously better when I worshipped at my friends memorial service, but I was in Gods presence. The pain was still very much there, but so was the Lord.

As is life, dear humans. It can be easy one day, and shockingly awful the next. Whatever life holds for us, God is there too. I think where I am at now with my working definition of worship, is that it's living in the awareness of God's continual presence in my life. Not just a generalized, "of course He is present" type of presence, but the "I desperately want you to recognize that I am with you to the bitter end" kind of presence. This huge, powerful, merciful, understanding, loving, fair, and good God is right there with you in that moment. Be drawn to Him. Embrace a life knowing that in everything you experience in life...every high or low...He is there. I think music is just a physical way that we understand a spiritual reality, which is fine...God's been using the physical to communicate heavenly things since we've been around. But worship is not confined to music or genre of traditional, hymn, contemporary (90's), new contemporary (2000's), newer contemporary (2010), or 'that-darn-drummer-is-playing-too-loud (last week, 2014), it is confined to your ability to remain aware of Who He Is, and Where He Is. Even with all the noise going on around us. :)