

June 14, 2020

Majoring in the Minors
Amos: What Is Your Worship Worth?
Amos 5:21-27

Opening words: Lost in the back of the Old Testament are the Minor Prophets. There are twelve in all. This is the list: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. In the traditional Hebrew canon, they are listed chronologically. Our canon is more concerned with length. Regardless, the order does not matter because each one is independent. It is important to note, they are not considered minor because they are not important. They are considered minor because they are brief in comparison to the Major Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Many consider the Minor Prophets to books of judgement. However, they are much more complex. They are books that paint a picture of God who never stops pursuing those who broke his heart.

This is sermon number three in my twelve-part sermon series, *Majoring in the Minors*. We began with the prophet Joel on Pentecost. He was the one who prophesied about the coming of the Holy Spirit. (Joel 2:28-29) Last week, we looked at Hosea and God's relentless love. Today, we look at Amos. He tells us, worship must be authentic. In other words, God must be our greatest priority in worship. Our scripture reading for today is Amos 5:21-27. Let me call this message *What Is Your Worship Worth?*

Amos 5:21-27 ²¹ "I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.

²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.

²³ Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.

²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

²⁵ "Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings
forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?"

²⁶ You have lifted up the shrine of your king,
the pedestal of your idols,
the star of your god —
which you made for yourselves.

²⁷ Therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,"
says the LORD, whose name is God Almighty.

Many years ago, before man walked on the moon, before a civil war threatened to divide America, or before Columbus discovered a New World, there was a man who spoke for God. His name meant "strong" or "brave," but we just call him Amos. His ministry lasted for ten years, between 750-760 BC. He was a blue-collar worker, a shepherd by trade. He lived six miles south of Bethlehem or eleven miles south of Jerusalem. He was sent to deliver a message of judgment against the northern kingdom (Israel). Yet, his message also resonated to the southern kingdom (Judah) too. For you see both kingdoms were going through of period of economic prosperity. That prosperity filled the people with spiritual smugness, which damaged their worship.

In our reading for today, Amos does not worry about hurting anyone's feelings. It is not that they are not worshipping. They conducted worship regularly, not their worship had growth shallow. In other words, they are just going through the motions. If you take the time to tear down the writing for today, there are five deficiencies in their worship. This is the list:

1. Their ceremonies were meaningless.
2. Their offerings were not sacrificial.
3. Their praise was insincere.
4. Their idolatry was shameful.
5. Their devotion was false.

This is the bottom line. Their worship was worthless. However, worship does not have to be worthless.

Several years ago, I was in Vladimir, Russia. It is about one-hundred and twenty miles east of Moscow. It was Orthodox Christmas Eve, January 6. The days of communism had past, and the church was full. In true Orthodox tradition, all the worshippers stood the entire service. Our little group from the United States stood in the back of the sanctuary and tried to blend in. We failed. The locals looked at us and wondered about us, foreigners. However, we did not ruin the worship. The white robed bearded priest walked through the crowd with his incense burning as the crowd chanted the ancient liturgy. The Holy Spirit washed over the crowd, including me. There is no other way to explain it. It was an incredible experience. It was an incredible spiritual experience. I do not know the orthodox tradition. I do not know the Russian language, but that service moved me. I experienced God that night.

However, what I remember most were the worshippers who attended. I studied their clothes and I looked at the lines in their faces. There was not a celebrity in the crowd. They were just people, like me. They came to church on Christmas Eve to worship and remember the birth of their savior. I wondered about their lives. I wondered about the homes in which they lived. I wondered about the problems they carried. There was much I did not know. However, there was one thing I did know. They came to church to experience God and they came to worship to experience some hope. It is not just true of an Orthodox congregation in Vladimir, Russians. We come to worship to experience God and be reminded there is hope.

William Temple was not wrong. He once said, "*Worship is quickening the conscience by the holiness of God, feeding the mind with the truth of God, purging the imagination by the beauty of God, opening the heart to the love of God, and devoting the will to the purpose of God.*" This is the question you must answer What is your worship worth? Worship is more than a collection of songs and responses. Worship is more than the readings and a message. True worship connects us with God and changes the way we live our daily lives. I can only speak for myself. My week is incomplete without worship. My soul is incomplete without God.

There is a website called *Church Leaders*. In February 2019, they posted an article written by Philip Wagner. He says there are five different reasons why worship is important. I cannot disagree with a signal one. This is his list:

1. **Worship involves surrender of our lives.** Our daily lives are filled with what we want to do. Worship is not about us. Worship is about God and what God wants us to do. Romans 12:1 says, we are to be living sacrifices.
2. **Worship is putting our focus on God.** Worship is not about your personal preferences, what songs you like or dislike, what style of worship you like or dislike, for example. True worship makes God the priority, not you.
3. **Worship involves 'Getting Out of the Way.'** We must learn how to remove our worries, our opinions, and our questions. Worship is not about you. It is about God.
4. **We must worship in the face of pain and suffering.** You know the truth. Life is hard! There is nothing simple about life. It is filled with all kinds of challenges. When life is hard, draw near to God, not away from God. Worship can be extremely powerful when life is hard.
5. **Worship is celebrating who God is and what He has done.** God is not just an historical figure who created the world and sent Jesus. God is contemporary. That means God is with us today.

It is important that you note none of those points relate to church size. You can have quality worship in large membership congregations and small membership congregations. It does not matter if you are a mid-size church like this one. It is important that you note that you can have quality worship in any church tradition. It does not matter if the church is Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Orthodox, or Evangelical. It is important that you note denomination does not matter. Quality worship can happen in one of the branches of Methodism, Presbyterianism, Lutheranism, or Baptist. You can have quality worship regardless of theology, liberal or conservative. It does not matter if the style of worship is traditional, contemporary, or

blended. God is not selective. The only thing that matters is the heart of the worshipper. What was the condition of your heart when you came to church today? What is your worship worth?

Years ago, I was involved in the local pulpit exchange. You know the pulpit exchange. All the local preachers exchange pulpits for one week. For preacher it is a working vacation. For lay people it is a way to meet someone new. Usually, it is the third Sunday in January, so the weather is horrible in Ohio, so nobody comes. That was the case on that particular year. Before I any further, I will not tell you the church I preached at that particular year to protect their identity.

When I arrived, everyone was practicing social distancing because no one had come. When I walked in the back door everyone ignored me. I walked up to a woman holding a handbag the size of a small car. She looked terrified and clutched her handbag against her bosom like I was going to steal it. I introduced myself, "I am Russ Adams from Western Reserve United Methodist and I am the guest preacher today." She sized me up and down and coldly responded, "Follow me." She led me to the front row of the sanctuary and said to me in a stern voice, "Sit here. Someone will be right with you." I sat down because I was afraid to stand. About forty minutes later, a man walked up to me with a smile on his face and said, "So, you're our preacher today? I guess, you will do." It was about time for worship to start so we sat up front facing the crowd. There was a thirty. They were scattered through the sanctuary. The smiling man began the service by welcoming everyone and asked someone in the crowd if Pearl was feeling better. Then, someone responded with a cynical comment. Then, we stood, and the smiling man introduced the first hymn. The organ sounded like something at the local roller rink and the organist must have thought we were at a funeral, because the hymn sounded like a dirge. The smiling man then prayed using horrible English, read the Psalter lesson, asked for prayer requests, reminded them to come to the chili cook-off, and prayed one more time. Then it was my turn. The smiling man introduced me as Ross Adams the preacher from down to road. They must have heard about me because about ten of the thirty got up and left. I lied to them and thanked them for their hospitality and read the scripture. That was when things got bad.

About five minutes into my sermon one of the ten evacuees came back into the sanctuary. He had a frantic look on his face and spied the crowd for someone. He found him sitting near the back of the sanctuary. He whispered something in his ear, and he got a shocked look on his face. He turned to the woman on his right and whispered something in her ear. She got a shocked look on her face and the three of them ran out together. The woman returned a few moments later and told another woman. The woman with the handbag saw everyone leaving so she left too. She grabbed a man's arm on the way out and motioned him to come. I kept preaching to the faithful few and then the original man came back in the sanctuary. Standing in the middle of the center aisle, he waved to the smiling man who was behind me. The smiling man jumped up and left me. As I preached, I wondered if something was wrong? Maybe someone had

a heart-attack. Maybe someone fell and broke their hip. Maybe someone had a stroke. I preached on and listen for an ambulance. However, there was not a sound. Curiosity got the best of me. I cut the sermon short and told the crowd we were only going to sing two verses of the last hymn and said a hasty benediction.

I hustled to the back of the church into the narthex and looked for everyone. I wanted to help. I did not see anyone, but I heard some people talking. I followed the sound down a short hall and found everyone standing in the unisex bathroom. They had surrounded the toilet, which someone had clogged. It was a gross site, but they found it fascinating. The congregation was trying to figure out who was responsible. They said it was probably the teenagers, but everyone in the crowd was over seventy-five, so I did not think that was possible. I think it was the woman who I met with the handbag. I stepped into the hallway and slipped out the same door I entered a few hours earlier. This is the point.

On that day, a clogged toilet was more interesting than me. On that day, a clogged toilet was more important than God. What is more important to you than God today? In worship, there is nothing more important than God? Worship is not about us. Worship is about God. Let me ask you the question of the day one more time. What is your worship worth? Do you remember what William Temple said about worship? He said, *"Worship is quickening the conscience by the holiness of God, feeding the mind with the truth of God, purging the imagination by the beauty of God, opening the heart to the love of God, and devoting the will to the purpose of God.* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** What is your worship worth?