

Sermon – July 14th 2024 – Bolton United Church

Andrew Dunn

Lectionary Scriptures
in message / liturgy:

2 Samuel 6:3–5, 12b—18
Psalm 24

3,175 words

Additional Scripture
references:

Psalm 150
Psalm 23

Key songs:

Lord, Be My Rock
VU 747 The Lord's My Shepherd
MV 120 My Soul Cries Out
VU 401 Worship the Lord
VU 533 When In our Music

Additional music:

Eternal God (John Rutter)
The Lord Is My Shepherd (John Rutter)

The Right Way to Worship God

How do we worship God?

And are we doing it right?

That's a really good question, and, as you might expect, doesn't have an easy answer.

We have a particular style of worship here at Bolton United Church, that is similar to how worship is conducted in many United Churches across the country.

Many churches start with a musical prelude, followed by a spoken Call to Worship (usually responsively, with a leader and then the congregation responding), and then an opening hymn.

This is typically followed by a prayer (often called a gathering prayer or prayer of approach), then another hymn or maybe a choir anthem, then another prayer, and then some announcements (which we used to call the Life and Work of the Congregation).

We then get to Scripture readings (typically two - and almost always chosen from amongst the scheduled lectionary readings for that Sunday) and a sermon or message of some sort.

That's followed by more music, another prayer (usually a prayer of intercession, which means asking God for something - we typically call that Prayers of the People) and the Lord's Prayer, then a closing hymn, a blessing or benediction, and a musical postlude.

That hasn't changed much over the years, and is the norm in most United Church congregations. Most congregations now do a Land Acknowledgement early on, but that is a recent thing.

We typically do a hymn sing at the start - this was a response to a desire for more music in a less structured environment, as we are a congregation that really enjoys singing. It's also an opportunity to try new music or sing some favourites that don't come up often enough in the service itself. I pick music for the hymn sing to balance that which is in the service - if the service hymns heavily favour the "great hymns of the church" I'll put more contemporary music in the hymn sing. If the service hymns are mostly from More Voices, I'll pick a couple from Voices United to sing at the start. And on occasion, if there's some kind of event (like, for example, Mother's Day or St. Patrick's Day) and that music doesn't really fit with the lectionary theme, I'll put some of that music in the hymn sing instead. And during Christmas season, it's a way to get more favourite carols in.

We also decided, several decades ago, to move the announcements to the beginning, so as to not interrupt the flow of worship with the “business” portion.

One thing you’ve probably all noticed is that I personally like to incorporate some other items as well, particularly at least one selection of recorded music – usually of a contemplative nature; my thought process is that it’s something we can all listen to, think, and take in, without any of us having to focus on creating or singing the music. For once, we can all be the recipients rather than the music makers; for when you’re busy trying to sing the right words and hit the right notes, it takes a little focus away from the meaning or the message. That’s one thing that’s a bit tough on the choir and musicians in weekly worship – because we have to focus on the next thing we’re going to sing, there’s an administrative burden that sometimes gets in the way of appreciating the moment and we on occasion miss part of the message or the impact of something said, because we’re always looking ahead to the next thing we need to sing or play. It’s tough to reconcile “performer” with “worshipper” sometimes.

It probably won’t surprise you to learn that many other churches use a similar format of worship to ours. Even the Catholic and Anglican congregations, whose services are probably least similar to ours, follow a very similar plan.

But is that the right way to worship God? And how do we know what the right way is?

There are exceptions to the basic plan.

I’ll talk for a couple of minutes about one of the branches of the Presbyterian church.

You probably know that the Presbyterians are one of the three ancestor churches of the United Church of Canada (the other two being the Methodists and the

Congregationalists), and that the genesis of Presbyterianism is the Church of Scotland.

Presbyterianism is a Reformed (Calvinist) Protestant tradition named for its form of church government by representative assemblies of elders. Though there are other Reformed churches that are structurally similar, the word Presbyterian is applied to churches that trace their roots to the Church of Scotland.

Presbyterian theology typically emphasizes the sovereignty of God, the authority of the Scriptures, and the necessity of grace through faith in Christ.

And, like most denominations, there have been splits many times into smaller splinter groups based on disagreements over doctrine, theology or forms of worship.

Presbyterians as a whole follow the regulative principle of worship – a Christian doctrine, held by some Calvinists and Anabaptists, that God commands churches to conduct public services of worship using certain distinct elements affirmatively found in scripture, and conversely, that God prohibits any and all other practices in public worship.

The opposite of this would be what is called the normative principle of worship, which teaches that whatever is not prohibited in scripture is permitted in worship as long as it is agreeable to peace and the unity of the Church. In short, there must be agreement with the general practice of the Church and no prohibition in scripture for whatever is done in worship.

For a fairly extreme view of the regulative form of worship, let's consider one of the splinter groups of Presbyterianism – the Free Presbyterian Church.

This group is colloquially known in Scots as the “wee Frees” and I do have some members of my extended family who at various times did belong to that sub-denomination.

I'm going to quote a bit from their website - where they feature a page entitled "The Right Way to Worship."

Under the heading "Worship is to be regulated by Scripture" we read the following:

God has not left His church free to invent her own worship. Rather, He has laid down in His Word exactly what is to be done. The Reformed and Biblical principle is that what is not commanded is not allowed in divine worship . The Second Commandment begins: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image" . The Shorter Catechism rightly explains that this forbids "the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in His Word" . This Regulative Principle of Worship requires that everything in worship must have divine warrant drawn from Scripture. Nothing else must be added.

This is why we should not sing in worship any songs other than the Psalms given by infallible inspiration of God, nor use musical instruments. We should not keep "Christmas" and "Easter", for although the birth, death and resurrection of Christ are in Scripture, there is no mention of marking them with an annual commemoration. Neither should we have images of any kind in our churches - no pictures of God or Christ or the Holy Spirit, and no symbols such as crosses, crucifixes and doves. Nor should we have dancing, drama, processions, soloists, choirs or any of the other human inventions delighted in by so many today.

Instead we should do only what the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Head of the Church, has told us to do in His Word. We should sing only the Psalms of Scripture. We should pray. We should read and preach the Scriptures. We should administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The plain and unadorned simplicity of Scriptural worship may seem strange to those who are not used to it. That is only because the worship of so many churches has

departed so far from the Bible. Even many who claim to be reformed in doctrine cannot claim to be reformed in worship.

And, under the heading “Worship should Recognize the Christian Sabbath” they go on to state:

The so-called festivals of the church calendar should not be recognised by Christians in any way. No one can deny that Christmas, Easter and the rest are not required in Scripture. Therefore they are not to be done. They are strange fire drawn from paganism and popery which have been imposed on the church by men.

So I think that presents an image of worship very different than what we generally practice here.

Imagine a service with no instruments or hymn singing. Imagine not celebrating Christmas or Easter. Imagine not having a choir. Imagine not having the cross on the wall, or the banners that decorate our walls.

Interestingly, that wasn't originally just a Wee Free prohibition - original Calvinist doctrine toed the regulative line and most Presbyterian churches didn't go in for much of what we tend to use as the basis for worship today. They were basically places of Scripture reading, length prayers, and fire-and-brimstone sermons designed to correct the sinful masses and push them not-so-subtly back towards God.

Over time, many Presbyterian denominations moderated this view, and began incorporating music, choirs, and more of what we'd recognize today. But to this day, the wee Frees remain the dictionary example of the serious “dour Scots” and their worship style is spartan, to say the least.

I'll admit that my background is Presbyterian, although I've never attended a Free Presbyterian service or been a member of a "wee Free" congregation. Also, you all know my bias is as a musician, singer, composer, and general lover of music. Much of my worship style is heavily coloured by time spent in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship groups, which share more traditions with Pentecostal denominations than with Presbyterians.

I'll state for the record that I take issue with many of the Free Presbyterian points, right off the bat.

The first thing that jumps out at me is the statement that they should only sing the Psalms, and they should do so without musical instruments.

In our Old Testament reading from Samuel this morning, what did we learn about how King David celebrated?

David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

and

David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet.

So clearly musical instruments were part of David's idea of how to celebrate before the Lord.

Furthermore, consider the words of Psalm 150, which we used as our Call to Worship this morning:

Praise him with a trumpet blast, praise him with the harp and lyre,

*dance and shake the tambourine, praise him with the strings and pipe,
praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.*

Psalm 150 is pretty important to me, for I think it sums up what I think our attitude to praising God should be.

Some of you, if you're really observant, might have noticed that in my Music Ministry report every year in the Annual Reports, I always end it with the last line of Psalm 150: Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

So I think we can dispense with the Wee Free prohibition on instruments.

Looking at the way worship was expressed in the Psalms, most of which are attributed to David, there was some serious, God-fearing, cowering at God's majesty and power - but there was a lot of dance, sing, blow the trumpet, bang the drums, and celebrate with wild abandon. That, I think, is the part the Calvinists missed.

So we have here a couple of very different views of how worship might look.

Are there other views?

Just to make a humorous point, we have friends who used to attend this church for a while, or at least the mother and her three children did. This was back when Rev. Jeff was our minister.

After one worship service, he got chatting with the mother and had made some comments that made it clear he was under the impression she was a single mom - makes sense, considering her husband had never once appeared in church.

She quickly corrected him, and explained that he simply worshipped at a different church. When he asked which one, she clarified that on Sunday mornings he went fishing!

As funny as the story is, I understand the appeal of time spent in nature, and I do view that as a form of worship.

It's an opportunity to appreciate all that God has created, and the balance and harmony that can be found in the great outdoors, at least until we humans come along and mess it up.

There's a sense of order, peace, and tranquility that, for me, represents the goal God had for Creation, and that need to be appreciated.

Psalm 23 begins with this:

- 1 *The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.*
- 2 *He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,*
- 3 *he refreshes my soul.*

Quiet waters and green pastures... the tranquility and harmony of nature are clearly reflected here, and David says that refreshes our soul.

And isn't appreciating the peace of the natural world a form of worship?

I mean, the birds do sing!

Music is, for this congregation at least, a very important part of worship, and I can't imagine a service without it.

To me, at least, music is something you can find everywhere and anywhere.

And sometimes, it comes unbidden.

We sang this morning one of the hymns I wrote nearly 20 years ago, ostensibly for the Summer Choir - what we called the singers and musicians who continued to gather informally to sing in worship in the month of July after regular choir rehearsals and planned weekly anthems ended at the end of June. We still to this day work that way, in order to give the singers and musicians a bit of a chance to relax in the summer and not be as focused on preparing music every week.

LORD, Be My Rock actually has its genesis in a ride on a TTC Subway train headed downtown. I was travelling downtown for work, and was sitting in the front car watching the view out the front window as we travelled through the tunnels heading from Finch Station down to Union.

Watching the tunnel walls flying past is a great way to unfocus your mind and let it wander.

As my mind wandered, some words started floating around in my mind, and then the words started connecting with each other. It wasn't too long before the basic concept of the first verse was there: *Lord, be my rock and my salvation. Be water on my lips, be faith to keep me whole, be love to fill my heart, my rock and my salvation.*

I quickly scribbled the words down on a piece of paper I had in my work bag, and as I read through them a couple of times, I started to hear a tune as well.

By the time I got to Union Station, most of the hymn was pretty much sketched out. It took a bit of work later to fit chords to it and write the piano accompaniment, but the bulk of it was already done.

My idea of worship is like that - you can open up your heart and mind to what you see and hear around you, and then express that using words, images, and musical notes.

It's a bit of a cross between the "fishing" style of worship and what we are doing here this morning.

There's an inscription in an opera house in Frankfurt that reads:

"Bach gave us God's word. Mozart gave us God's laughter. Beethoven gave us God's fire. God gave us Music that we might pray without words."

St. Augustine is often quoted as having said "He who sings, prays twice." The Latin cited for this is "Qui bene cantat bis orat" or "He who sings well prays twice".

Actually, this does not appear in any writings of St. Augustine that anyone has found. He did write, "cantare amantis est... Singing belongs to one who loves" . That is often invoked as the source of the quote about singing and praying.

What he really said was this: For he who sings praise, does not only praise, but also praises joyfully; he who sings praise, not only sings, but also loves Him whom he is singing about, to, and for. There is a praise-filled public proclamation in the praise of someone who is confessing and acknowledging God; in the song of the lover there is love.

This is a very interesting passage. Augustine is saying that when the praise is of God, then something happens to the song of the person praising God that makes it more than just any kind of song. The object of the song, in a way, becomes the subject. Something happens so that the song itself becomes Love - in its manifestation of love of the one who truly is Love itself.

I have a T-shirt at home that reads as if it were a dictionary entry for the word Voice.

It gives the pronunciation of the word, classifies it as a noun, and then gives the definition: the only musical instrument invented by God.

So as we lift our voices in worship, I think, for me, that is the quintessential example of what worship should be. We sing together, because we consider it both prayer and praise.

We praise God for all the things around us, and at the same time, we ask God for those things we need.

I personally think the Free Presbyterian Calvinists have got it dead wrong.

God gave us the gift of music, and voice, and singing, as well as the ability to invent musical instruments and learn to play them, and the talent to create new music. What David started, is ours to carry on.

And if that's a gift from God, then it is right to use the gifts from God in praise of the God who gave them to us.

As we'll sing at the end of our service this morning:

When in our music God is glorified, and adoration leaves no room for pride. It is as though the whole creation cried: Alleluia!

Let every instrument be tuned for praise. Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise. And may God give us faith to sing always. Alleluia!

Continue to praise God in word and in song, for it is right to give God thanks and praise.

In my mind, whatever way you want to worship God is the right way to worship God.

That's what makes it such a personal relationship. It's you, or me, giving thanks and praise to our creator.

The important thing isn't how you praise God - but the fact that you do. As Psalm 150 sums it up: "Let everything that hath breath praise the LORD."