

I. Intro. *(Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer* Ps. 19:14)

A. Suppose I came up and asked several people here, "When you go shopping, what expectations do you bring with you?"

1. What kind of answers would you expect to hear? I think you might expect certain answers like,

- a) *I expect to find what I need ... or*
- b) *To get in and get out as fast as I can*

2. So then if I asked the same people, "When you go to worship at church, what expectations do you bring?" ... do you think the answers would be the same?

- a) My own first response to that last question would be, "Boy, I hope not!"
- b) I invite you to hold those two questions about expectations for a bit, while I describe a recent local workshop that several attended from our Worship Ministry Team

B. The workshop at Clinton Frame Mennonite Church was called "Designing God-centered Worship"

1. It helped us decide that now was a good time to have this series on worship that we've just started

2. One seminar at this workshop, led by Mike Zehr, was entitled "Wal-Mart Worship"

- a) Now that was not talking about people who consider Wal-Mart divine!
- b) It made a comparison of why people enter Wal-Mart and why they often enter worship
- c) (I know some of you here scrupulously avoid patronizing Wal-Mart and other "big box stores" for ethical reasons, but what I'm going to say still applies, assuming that you do retail shopping somewhere ...)

3. This comparison Mike made was so fascinating that I'd like to summarize it myself. *Why do people go shopping?*

II. Wal-Mart shopping and "Wal-Mart worship"

A. Wal-Mart shoppers ...

- 1. go to get what they want *(Isn't that why most of us go shopping? Often bring a shopping list ... see other people checking things off)*
- 2. want a convenient and comfortable experience *(Want store to be open early in morning, late at night ... to find*

WAL-MART SHOPPERS ...

- Go to get what they want
- Want a convenient & comfortable experience
- Want it to cost them very little

things quickly, go thru check-out line fast)

3. want it to cost them very little (*everyone's looking for a bargain ... WM's slogan? "Always the low price"*)

B. Now there are also people at church Mike called "Wal-Mart worshipers" ... This is all about expectations people bring to worship. Wal-Mart worshipers at church ...

1. Go to get what they want. *Sound familiar?*

- a) *Don't we sometimes use the term "church shopping"?*
- b) *Wal-Mart worshippers know exactly what they want out of worship and they're looking for it every Sunday ... certain kind of singing/instruments or preaching/ language usage ...*



2. Want a convenient and comfortable experience

- a) *they want choices ... don't want to get up too early in the morning, or stay too late and miss their reservation at Bob Evans ..*
- b) *they need padded seats and songs they already know*

3. Want it to cost them very little

- a) *They want noncontroversial feel-good messages every Sunday*
- b) *Don't want to hear about making commitments of their money or time*

C. If this comparison feels a little shocking to you, it's not half as striking as a short video I'd like to share with you [www.ignitermedia.com/mini-movies/18/Mechurch]

1. I hope we can get a laugh out of something like this that hits us in the face with the "Wal-Mart worship" attitude, taken to an extreme
2. I didn't bring up the "Wal-Mart worship" metaphor to point fingers at anyone in particular ... if we're honest, we can probably each see ourselves there

III. Bottom line this morning is very simple: ***Worship is not first about you and me ... It's about God***

A. I wish to launch from the "Wal-Mart worship" image in order to gently **confront an attitude in churches that is poisonous to genuine worship and does not belong in our conversations:**

1. *"I didn't get anything out of worship today"*
2. Has other variations, such as *"I can't worship here because I don't like ..."* (then insert things like music style, preaching, length of service, political leanings)

3. If there's only one real-life impact that you take away from this service today, I hope it's examining and reducing how often your first response to worshiping God is to say, "I don't like ..." or "I don't get anything out of it ..."

4. Now that may sound very black/white and harsh ... you may be thinking, "It's not that simple, Neil" You're right, it isn't ...

5. Allow me to address *three questions or objections* that complicate making worship all about God

B. "Neil, we're all human and none of us has a great worship experience every single time"

1. Yes, we all have bad days (headaches, fussy kids, mood swings, crises ...)

a) Sometimes we struggle to be here in worship and sometimes we're very distracted

b) My intention today is not to put a gag on everyone who ever thinks or says, "I didn't get anything out of worship" ... because if I did that, I'd be silencing myself

2. If we don't believe that God is gracious and patient with us when we don't bring our best attitudes in the door to worship, then this worship thing really is pointless

3. But let that not stop us from the regular discipline of coming to worship not for what we will get out of it, but because our creator God deserves praise from us, God's creatures

C. "Neil, how far am I supposed to take this tolerance for what I think is 'bad worship'? I'm sorry but there are some places where I just can't worship!"

1. I'll grant you there is an undeniable element of truth about how far any of us can go before the worship environment we're in tears us down more than it builds us up

a) Not advocating that people stay in church situations where they are personally miserable every Sunday,

b) nor where the direction and theology is just incompatible with their foundational beliefs

c) There are enough kinds of churches in Elkhart County to suit the diversity of all local Christians!

2. But those extremes of "my way or the highway" in church preferences should not be the norm for most Christians

3. I am suggesting that before we grumble and complain about what we don't like in worship at a church where God led us, let us first ask ourselves if meeting God in worship matters more to us than getting our own needs met.

4. In this series, every Sunday as you arrive before the service, you will see some verses from Psalm 96, and a reflection question on the screen ... I invite you to let those words on the screen help you focus more on God as you enter into worship

D. "Neil, are you saying that the styles I like don't matter at all, so all churches should just worship God in the same way?"

1. **No** ... I'm not asking you to try to ignore your own personal worship preferences because that would be impossible

a) Nor am I saying that every church should be an eclectic mix of all styles just for the sake of being inclusive ...

b) Nor am I saying that churches should be generic and have no identifiable styles or personalities, which is also impossible

2. At Waterford, we are deliberately a Mennonite church, and we tend to come from certain worship traditions and not from others

a) The worship services that we have here largely **do** reflect the preferences and familiarities of the people who regularly attend here

b) If we were to suddenly have Christian hip-hop music, or to feature the organ every Sunday, that just wouldn't be a good "fit" for WMC

3. On the other hand, we as worship planners cannot plan worship services for over 300 people while constantly being afraid we're going to offend somebody

a) At times we do push you the worshipers outside of your comfort zones, within some limits

b) We have ... had people pray out loud simultaneously like they do in Beninese churches ... had people get down on their knees or use their bodies in gestures with songs ... In this series we're **not** having oral announcements

c) We do take note of the culture of this place for worship, but we are not slaves to public opinion

IV. So after all those questions and objections, let's return to the main point: **ultimately worship is not about us, it's about God**

A. Whether we find meaning in worship ... whether it speaks to us ... whether we "get anything out of it" **does matter, but that should not be the primary category we use when thinking of worship**

1. In reflecting on what happens in worship, the first words out of our lips should not be, "I liked it because..." **or** "I just couldn't connect to it because ..."

2. As real as such sentiments are, those are secondary reflections

B. Let me suggest the primary questions we should be asking when we reflect on worship:

1. Was God honored? Was God pleased?

a) That is why my first words up here this morning were the reminder from Psalm 19:14 about our words and meditations being acceptable to God.

b) Psalm 104:33-34 is also an important biblical guide for how we think about our worship ... *read*

c) Whether our worship pleases God should be a bigger concern to us than whether it meets our personal preferences standards

2. Did God meet me/us here?

a) An encounter with the living God is what we hope happens every time we meet for worship

b) To ask whether God was moving among us is to shift the focus in worship off ourselves and back onto God

3. What message did God have for me/us?

a) This question requires us to expand our thinking beyond our common self-centered patterns.

b) More than anything else, this question is important because it starts w/ the assumption that *God does have a message for us if we will simply put ourselves in a place of openness to receiving it.*

Some of this has to do with where we are physically ... putting ourselves literally in places where experience tells us God is more likely to be with us ...

(a) Places like here at church on Sunday morning ... or out in the woods or by the lake surrounded by God's voices in creation

(b) or in a quiet room in your house early in the morning when you have time to be alone with God ... or commuting in your car listening to uplifting Christian music

If we show up where God is known to show up, our chances are greater of hearing from God than if we avoid those places

c) But there's one more aspect of putting ourselves in a place of openness for God's message to us ...

It's not enough to show up in the physical places where God usually speaks, if our hearts are closed to His message

REFLECTING ON TRUE WORSHIP

- Was God honored? Was God pleased?
- Did God meet me/us here?
- What message did God have for me/us?

Just because you showed up in church today doesn't guarantee God's message is going to get through to you

We have to also come with a spirit of openness, which leads us back to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman

V. Jesus told her God desires worshipers who worship in spirit and in truth

A. A straightforward reading of Jesus' words tells us he meant that **physical location for worshiping God matters little compared to our openness to God's spirit and truth**

B. I recently came across another lens for looking at Jesus' words about worshiping in spirit and truth

1. In her book, *How Shall We Worship?* (©2003 Tyndale), author Marva Dawn sees in these words of Jesus a creative way forward through "the worship wars" of the last 20 years in churches

a) Some of you know from the past few decades how divisive the topic of music styles has been in American Christianity ...

The "worship wars" have often pitted "contemporary" music against older traditional hymns ... Traditionalists claim contemporary music is shallow and fluffy, while contemporary advocates complain about the old music stifling the Holy Spirit and human creativity.

b) Marva Dawn notes that "contemporary" music strongly emphasizes feelings ("spirit" you might call it), while traditional hymns heavily emphasize doctrines ("truth," in other words)

She says the worship wars have often felt like a struggle of spirit against truth in church music

So isn't it interesting that Jesus says the Heavenly Father seeks those who worship Him in spirit *and* in truth?

2. Could it be that both contemporary *and* traditional music are needed in God's church, just as we are to worship God in spirit *and* in truth?

VI. Conclusion

A. We've covered a lot of ground this morning, yet more than anything else, when you leave thinking about this worship time, **just remind yourself of this question: "Who was it for, anyway?"**

B. Let me close with an observation that connects with our overall life as a congregation

1. A year ago we moved to having two worship services because we were getting crowded in this space in one service

2. When we decided that the two worship services would be basically identical, it was largely for two reasons:

a) It was much easier on the pastors and lay people who lead worship ... We knew it would take much less preparation work than to have two very different services

b) We wanted to retain more of a sense of a single church community, rather than two worshiping bodies with different identities

3. But now that we're paying attention to worship itself thru this series, I've found a third reason I affirm having identical services:

a) Having very similar worship experiences between first and second services reminds us that worship is more about giving God glory than about giving us what we want

b) (*Repeat Psalm 115:1a*)