

What is worship?

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“If there’s no music, people won’t come.” That was the declaration. The conversation was about worship and, more precisely, what we are going to do about music next summer. The assessment: no music; no people.

At Old South, the church I serve, we are in the midst of a search for a new organist. In order to make the feeble salary that we are offering seem a little more reasonable, we made the job a September-through June-position. When we made the plan, we didn’t figure out exactly what we would do about next July and August (and the following summers). We’ll talk about that at budget time in the fall.

Already, though, there is concern about next summer. “If there’s no music, people won’t come,” was announced and left hanging in the tense air between the speaker and myself. The sentiment was not unknown to me. I’ve heard similar decrees several times over my decade of ministry at Old South. But, still, each time I hear it, it feels like a slap across the face.

What is worship? What is worship without music? What is worship without spoken word, without the Bible, without some sort of lesson, interpretation of scripture story, without prayer, without silence?

Don’t get me wrong. Music is important to me too. Many of my best worship memories have something to do with music. But, with no music, would it really feel like no worship at all? With no music, would the congregation stay away?

As we deal with the many questions and challenges of being the church in these days, it seems to me that one of our greatest challenges is making sure we focus not just on certain components of worship, but on the worship experience as a whole. Worship must not become something of a “concert” or a recital, with a few words strung in between. Worship is the place for prayer and praise. It is the place to learn and explore what it means to be God’s people—individually and collectively. It is the place to hear scripture story, and to consider who we are in the ongoing narrative of God and God’s people. It is the place to listen for God’s voice in our lives, and to speak the language of prayer and wonder.

Music is important, to be sure, but it ought not be set upon a pedestal, the one thing without which we cannot go on. When we place music above everything else, we set music as the object of our worship, instead of God.

The elements of worship point to that which is part of us, but also beyond us. It’s okay to be fretful when we are unsure about how one element will be expressed and offered, but we must strive to keep our fretfulness in perspective, and not to allow it to distort our perceptions, or to close ourselves off from the movement of the Spirit in our midst.

I can’t imagine that we won’t be able to come up with a reasonable plan for music next summer. But, even if we have some difficulties, I feel confident that we will find a way to sing and to offer a joyful noise in worship. Our faith will lead us there, if we trust in the One who brings us together.

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