BEYOND PREFERENCES:
Worship as Practicing the Presence of God

By Jennifer Davidson

A congregation gathers to have a discussion about worship as part of their annual retreat. A well-meaning leader stands at the chalkboard and asks, “What do you like about worship at our church? What do you think needs to change?” Another congregation wants to make their worship more relevant to the lives of those present. They distribute a survey after church one morning asking questions like, “What are your favorite hymns and/or praise songs? What would you like to see more of in worship? What would you like to see less of?”

I have been present for many conversations about worship that echo exactly these preference-centered approaches. Unfortunately, these conversations rarely lead anywhere. When the conversation does create action; it often leads toward conflict and less to understanding. Worship conversations that focus solely on preference tend to keep congregants in a state of shallowness. This creates an environment in which it can be impossible to remember that worship, while deeply personal, is also profoundly communal.

In a Worship Planning & Leading course at American Baptist Seminary of the West, students work together to develop the weekly chapel services. In addition to planning upcoming services, each week in class there is a time of reflection of the previous service. To initiate this reflection time, I ask students, “At what point in worship did you experience the presence of God?” While there are always some students who are able to answer right away, many are often hard-pressed to answer the first time they are asked. They don’t remember necessarily paying attention to that in worship. Rather, they are more accustomed to paying attention to whether they are familiar with the hymn or their response to the sermon than to grasp the moment when they were aware of God’s presence among them.

By the second and third time we reflect on this question, more and more responses come. Students begin to enter worship with the intention of noticing God’s presence. In doing so, their habit of focusing on what they like or don’t like about the service begins to fade by comparison. Excited by what they are discovering for themselves, they also look forward to hearing the diversity of responses by their classmates each week. They begin to notice: “You mean that hymn I struggled to sing... that’s when you experienced God? Wow!” or they marvel, “I felt like God was overwhelmingly present when Sung-Jin prayed in Korean, even though I don’t speak Korean myself, and I don’t know exactly what he said.”

Worship conversations that focus on the presence of God in the midst of worship tend to lead us out of ourselves to the understanding that people experience God’s presence in many different ways. There is a shift from the shallow end of our discussion to find that we are swimming together in the marvelous presence of the Spirit. We become increasingly capable of learning to experience God’s presence in multiple ways. Naming God’s presence equips each person to notice God’s presence.

There are limits to this approach. There always will remain the temptation for individuals to focus on themselves. There is also the need to recognize that the conception of God is not limited to the personal perception of God’s current presence. God is with us in our worship whether or not any one person in the gathered assembly feels as though he or she has experienced the presence of God. As James McClendon wrote, “The promise is not, ‘Where two or three are gathered, you will have such and such worship experiences.’ He only promised to be at hand.” There will be moments, and for some of us, very long stretches of time, when we do not feel as though God is present in our midst. Nonetheless, God is present. God is present in the lives of the people gathered, in their broken hearts and broken bodies. He is present to those whose heels click in the air with joy, and for gasps, cries, and groans of those who grieve. This presence is there when we feel it and when we don’t.

The next time you are having a conversation with others on how to approach worship, I encourage you to begin with how to name God’s presence. Shifting from a personal to a communal perspective will take time. It will, however, deepen the worship experience. See if you begin to notice God showing up in worship much more than you had before. Seek to honor those moments in other people’s experience, even when they do not match your own. Together in worship, practice the presence of God.

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