

Epiphany In Worship - Looking Outward

**Matthew 5:21-26
Romans 12:1-21**

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Joseph Goebbels, Adolph Hitler's minister of propoganda once said this:
people will believe a big lie sooner than a little one; and if you repeat it frequently enough people will sooner or later believe it.

Hitler himself wrote the following in his autobiography -
"in the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus... they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie... It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously."

The big lie - so big that no one even begins to believe that it may be anything but true. It's a powerful tool in politics.

It's also a powerful spiritual tool.

I want to suggest to you this morning that there is a "big lie" warping its way through church after church across our country.

It's evil.

It's completely false.

It's terribly destructive.

And yet, Christian after Christian gets suckered in by it. As a result their faith is stunted. Maybe even destroyed.

The lie is exposed by God's Word.

I hope that you'll see it unmasked this morning - and leave here never to be its victim.

Hear God speak as we read together -

Matthew 5:21-26

Romans 12:1-21

Last week we spoke about the wise men, journeying a long way to pay homage and bring their gifts to Jesus -
- honoring him as King of the Jews.

They took this long trip,
without any shortcuts,
to worship him.

We considered how they came
- intentionally
and
- clearly.

They came having made proper preparations.
They came very aware who it was they were paying homage to.

Which helped us reflect on our worship -
an act that, like the journey of the magi, can have no shortcuts.

We, too, need to prepare ourselves for worship.
We, too, need to be very clear about the purpose of our worship -
- that we are here to honour the Triune God.

One more thing about their worship which we didn't mention.
The bible doesn't tell us about one wise man who comes by himself.
It speaks of a group of them.
And they come together.

The son of God is revealed to the group of them as they journey to him.
Which is also something hugely important to worship.

It's something reflected in the shape of the cross here on the front wall.
Notice that there are two arms to it.
One vertical.
And one horizontal.

Those two arms point to two very important parts of Christian worship.
The first, the biggest and longest, points up.
Up to God.
Worship Him.

The second, smaller and yet very significant, points outward.
Outward to those around us.
Worship together with them.

Both belong.
And they belong together.

Worship drives us upward to the presence of God.
Worship drives us outward - away from a preoccupation with ourselves,
It drives us to others.
To join with them.
To share with them.
To serve them.
Worship drives us upward.... and outward.

It cannot be any other way.

Yet here is where the lie comes in.
The Evil One, and sometimes our own stubborn human nature, would have us
believe and behave differently;
would have us believe and behave that worship is actually a very private
affair;
that worship is something strictly between me and God.

I worship in my way and time and space.
You may worship in your way and time and space.

We each do our own thing.
And that's just fine.

Which is just the problem -
- it's **NOT** fine.
In fact, it's the Big Lie.

Worship can never really happen outside of community;
outside of relationships with other believers.

Worship is not meant to be an "*I*" event.
Worship is a "*WE*" event.

Our reading from Matthew 5 is actually very stark and blunt about that.
No nonsense.

If you find yourself out of sorts with a fellow believer, don't expect that you can wander into God's presence and pretend that everything is just fine.

It simply doesn't work.

The One who created both you and me will simply not accept my words of praise and love and adoration, if all I can come up with for you are words of scorn and anger and abuse.

He'll toss my words aside as empty words; lying words.

Worship together - or don't worship at all.

Later, one of Jesus' dearest friends, St. John was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write -

Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. [1 John 4]

God will believe it when we say that we love Him, when we can demonstrate that we love other people.

Our horizontal relationships, our earthly relationships, are intimately connected to our vertical relationships, our heavenly relationships.

The one affects the other.

To suggest otherwise is simply another version of the Big Lie.

In the book of Romans Paul spends the first 11 chapters telling us all about salvation through Jesus. In chapter twelve he begins to describe the thankful, faithful response of the believer. All that God has done for us in Jesus Christ becomes the impetus for our response to Him.

What is that response?

Latreia, says Paul.

Make your response a latreia response.

In all of your reality - latreia.

It's an ancient Greek word that means worship. In the Old Testament which St. Paul used, the Septuagint, *latreia* is the word that referred to the worship which the Jews carried out in the Temple. It's what you do when you go to Church. Worship.

Practice *latreia*, practice worship with your bodies.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual latreia, your spiritual worship. (Romans 12:1)

Which generally gets interpreted as meaning that we need to think about what we do with our bodies all week long.

Our recreation.

Our leisure.

Our vocation.

Think of all these things as an extension of church worship.

Which is true.

But in accepting that, don't miss what Paul does with his talk about body.

He doesn't first of all go on to talk about what we do with parts of our bodies and reference some of the different activities of life.

Instead he points to other bodies around us - v.3.

And he says - honour them.

Don't forget about them.

As you present your physical life to God as an act of worship, remember the bodies of the people around you.

Don't raise your own esteem too highly.

Don't consider yourself too important.

When you live the life you have in your body, and seek to do that as worship, make sure that you honour the other bodies around you.

Love one another.

Outdo one another in showing honour.

Contribute to their needs.

Extend hospitality.

In Romans 12 there is a great mystery that often gets overlooked.

It's found in verse 5.

We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.

Our physical lives, when joined together, somehow become the Body of Christ. It becomes Christ alive right here on earth, through us.

Really.

This is more than just metaphor.

Paul doesn't say that we are **LIKE** the body of Christ.

He says that we **ARE** the Body of Christ.

Later, in a letter to the Corinthian Church, 12th chapter, he repeats the same thing.

The life of Jesus pulses and moves through the unity of believers.

When believers can't stand shoulder to shoulder, the life of Jesus is simply not present.

And if Jesus is not there, there is no mediator to bridge the physical event of worship here on earth with the throne room of heaven.

Our worship falls flat.

It hits the ceiling and bounces back.

Dead.

There is no cross if there is no horizontal member.

Then it is only a pole, a stick.

There is no worship if there is no acknowledgement of and hospitality toward, and love for one another.

You know one of the biggest heresies that we tend to fall for time and time again?

It is the idea we get of me, an individual, going to a building somewhere of my choosing and desire, at a time and in a way that suits me best, to do church.

Or, perhaps, to stay home, if I feel more like that, and NOT do church.

Just like I chose to do my shopping where and how suits me.

Or join a service club or hobby organization that fits my lifestyle.

.....or not join.

Individualism says, "So..... what's wrong with that?"

Individualism, roughly put, is the social teaching and belief that the most important unit in society, the one that matters the most, is valued the highest, and around whom social agendas must revolve -

– is the individual.

That's what people like Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith taught - and we as Canadians have swallowed it; hook, line and sinker.

Communal organizations and structures, so it goes, are fine, perhaps even advantageous, but only so far as they promote the welfare of the individual.

The individual is independent.

Communal organization, government and structure is only there to serve the good of the greatest possible number of independent units.

Social structure is the means.

The individual is the end.

If the structure or group helps that most valued unit, the individual, attain his or her goals - great.

If not - better find another structure or group. Or go it alone.

Think for a moment - honestly -

How do you judge the value, the effectiveness, of this congregation?

What will make you go home and judge this day to be a success or failure?

How much of that will depend on what it gives *me*?

I didn't get anything out of the sermon.

Education classes were great - exactly what *I* was looking for.

Had a great time at coffee - people came and *talked to me*.

Don't think I'll be back because *I* don't like it.

As soon as those words roll around in our mind we've fallen for the sucker punch of Individualism again.

The Great Lie has got us!

I believe that Satan has moved in, big time, into this whole social understanding of Individualism and set up shop there. What in bible language we would call a "**stronghold**."

It's one of his primary launching points to get at us, our families, our church and our nation.

Separate us from each other, and rip us down one by one.

Divide and conquer.

And in doing so he depowers one of the great acts of the Church -

the act of Worship,

our greatest and most unique act in this world,

where we, on earth, are joined together with the saints and angels in heaven before the throne of the Creator of the Cosmos.

Read the scriptures carefully and you **WILL** see a deep value placed on the individual.

As individuals we need to make a personal commitment to Christ.

As individuals we are responsible for our conduct.

As individuals we will enter eternity - either eternal bliss or horror.

When we come to Jesus He accepts and welcomes us - one by one.

What you will **NEVER** see, though, is that the individual is **THE** ultimate unit of value. Matters the most. That the community is just a means to get the individual to where he or she needs or wants to go.

In fact, if you are truly open and search carefully, you'll discover that there is **far more** talk in the Bible about the importance and the welfare of the **community** than there is about the single person.

People matter.

People are valuable.

That's how God created each one of you –

– Valuable, important, loved by Him!

– Each of you!

– Don't **ever** forget that.

But not just you.

Also the person sitting beside you this morning!

And each of us is called to acknowledge that, and to make room for the one beside us, to deliberately seek to join together with them,

and

together to travel to the throne of God in paying our homage.

We're in the season of Epiphany - remembering how Jesus is revealed in the world.

He was first revealed through the worship of the wise men, when they came, **together**, and bowed before Him.

He continues to be revealed today, when believers assemble at 1475 Merivale road **together** and bow before Him.

Which sometimes means a lot of work.

It takes work for people from different cultures to understand each other.

It takes work for people of different generations to cross the gap between each other.

It takes work for people of different genders to build respect for each other.

But in that work, as unity is built, and people join heart to heart in faith, a wonderful thing happens.

A warmth creeps into the community.

A vibrancy begins to build.

Love starts to grow.

Peace settles in.

Know why?

Because Jesus is very really present in those joined lives.

And through Jesus the blessings of heaven begin to flow.

Worship - meeting our Lord.

It happens when we look upward.

It also happens when we look outward.

Both - and.

There is no shortcut around it.

And it can be no other way.