Sermon, October 30, 2022
Isaiah 1:10-18; Luke 19:1-10
"Worship That Makes a Difference: Something New"
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My senior year of college, I took a class on modern Russian History. It wasn't that I was particularly excited about Russian History, especially modern Russian history, as it was at the beginning of the end of the cold war at that time. Russia was opening up but still under a communist ideology and control. But like almost every other senior in college, I needed hours to graduate and I needed to fulfill a history minor.

None of which is particularly noteworthy. As I said, almost every Senior in college does something like that. But a couple of things happened that spring quarter. I had a great teacher who drew you in and got you interested in the subject matter. And at the end of the quarter right after graduation, he led a tour behind the iron curtain into Russia. And he wanted to know if I might be interested in going on the tour.

The stars aligned for me financially just right, and I got to go. One of the most fascinating things that happened occurred during a conversation with our tour guide. Now, she was a young woman in probably her early thirties and very pro-Russia, a pro-communist person. And at that time, maybe you had to be to get a job like that.

Regardless, we had a conversation one night about all the people at that time trying to get out of the Soviet Union and into the west. And she said "you know, it's not easy for the people who leave here. It's not

just language and customs. But you have too many choices in the United States". Too many choices? What do you mean? "Well, I am told you go to the grocery store in the U,S, and you have all of these choices. Not just beans, but hundreds of different types of canned beans. And when you decide what type of bean you want, then you have to decide which brand. It's overwhelming to have so many choices about everything". She paused, "Too many choices. Takes too long. It's better here. Not many choices, but it's faster".

Now, we can debate her philosophy all day, but she also had a point. We do love choices. We like having opinions, we like being able to pick and choose what we want. We enjoy having to figure out what we want and which one we want. And, of course we know it's not quite as hard as she made it, we look for quality or price or favorite brand. So it's not quite as she claimed, but we love to be able to have what we want when we want it. But even as you check out, we have a section for an impulse buy. As you wait in line, you can shop just a bit more and get a snack that you probably aren't hungry for and wasn't in your mind two minutes ago. But you might as well do a bit more shopping while you are waiting.

There is something about having a selection that gives us a sense of control. It's all about what we want. We get to decide because we want to select. How often have we had someone say *I never go there, they don't have good*, what, *selection*. I want to pick and choose, I want to be in control, I want what I want.

And there is, of course, nothing wrong with options. There is nothing wrong with wanting a good selection. We like options. But it can put us in a mindset where we think all of life ought be about what we want. That all of life should be about pleasing ourselves and getting what we want when we want it. And while what might work very well at the grocery store, it can be deadly for us when we look at our worship. We are beginning this morning a new series looking at worship. We've titled it ***Worship That Makes a Difference***. We want to spend time looking at what worship really is and to see how we can develop an attitude of worship that makes a difference in our lives. And to see worship ought to expand itself beyond an hour on Sunday morning.

When we look to our Scripture this morning from Isaiah, we see what ought to be a chilling wake up call for us as we look at what worship is, or ought to be. In this passage, God speaks through Isiah and He looks to Judah and Jerusalem and He describes a people who are doing all of the worship pieces right. They have the church calendar with the sacrifices, the liturgy is all exactly as it ought to be. And God says *your worship has become an abomination to me. Your worship has caused me to reach the limits of my endurance.* Think about that. He who neve slumbers or sleeps says the way your worship wears me out.

Why? Because their worship isn't transforming anyone. He says you come and you do everything right, but when you leave, you are exactly as you were when you started. You sin and rebel against me, you

come and do all the sacrifices, you leave and go right back to living a broken rebellious life. God is very clear, worship to be worship ought to make a difference in someone's life. It ought to be transforming, and if it is not, it's not worship. You can have an excellent choir sing the hymns, play them as played for centuries, you can have all the lights and a professional praise band, but if your worship doesn't change anyone, it's not worship.

The problem is that we so often treat worship like going to the grocery store. We come with the idea that it all about us. It's about our having a great selection. *Oh, I used to go to this church, but I didn't like the selection in music or worship time, they have children in worship and they are noisy and kick the back of my pew, I don't like that. They never sing my favorite hymns, It's early, it's late, No one welcomes me, they aren't friendly, they are too friendly, it's loud, it's not loud enough.* You get the idea.

Now, please hear this, I am not saying any of those things aren't legitimate concerns. They are, we all want to be in a place where we can worship. But here is the thing. You could get all of your selections, it could be just right, you could do worship in the way that pleases you, and if it doesn't transform you, it's not worship. We have to stop focusing on the method and focus more on the purpose of worship. Because that's what makes a difference. I don't want my worship to exasperate God.

How do I know that the way I worship makes a difference? How do we move out from that self-centered grocery store mentality? Isaiah lays out that framework for us in this passage. He says God desires that we be made clean. I can't worship God with a rebellious heart. I want the blood of Jesus to make me clean, not just forgive my sins, but to break me free from the sin that controls my life. Wesley would call this Justifying Grace. I want to be made right with God. Every time I worship, is my heart set on being made clean before God?

Isaiah says we ought to allow God to remove the evil from our beings. Made perfect in Christ. It's not enough to be forgiven, we ought to be made into the image of Christ where our hearts have no desire for sin, no desire to do anything that isn't pleasing to God.

Isaiah says God demands that we do good. I think we miss this in our attitude of worship; we concentrate on the absence of not doing evil. But God says it's not enough, it's not enough to not do what's wrong, but do good. In your daily worship, are you doing good? Are you making a difference in someone's life? That's worship, that's what pleases God, when I lift my eyes off myself, keep my heart focused on God as the lord of all and seek to do good.

Worship is not just about the forgiveness of my sins or my being made perfect in Christ. Worship causes us to seek out the good for other people. If we come and we praise God but have no desire for the poor, no concern for their needs, no concern for the hurting, then we haven't worshiped.

Do you want to live a life of worship that makes a difference? Then let’s concentrate on what really matters. It’s not about our selection, it’s about our being changed by God. Is your desire to be free from sin and be made clean? Then you are worshiping. Is your desire to be made perfect in Christ, that's worship. Are you doing good? That's worship? If you are an advocate for the poor and the hurting, that's worship and that is worship that makes a difference. Amen.