

*Isaiah 1:10–20*  
*Luke 12:32–40*

One of the highlights of my Sunday afternoon is reviewing the responses that you leave each week on our Virtual Friendship Pad. In addition to telling us who you are and where you are — it is a comment box, a place to share your thoughts. In this pandemic, in addition to prayer requests, you've consistently left encouraging affirmations for our worship leaders ever adjusting to a changing virus and our gifted choir willing to sing through masks. These tools allow our staff to see your gratitude for the hours spent crafting worship. Your comments give our terrific tech team ideas about how to improve the accessibility and functionality of online worship. You keep us on our toes. When a link isn't working — you tell us. With our understandable imperfections, there are things we don't get right in our desire to offer worship that is fully inclusive and life-giving for every person. Many of you use the tool to tell us what you thought of worship.

Yet it is how you felt in worship —rather than what you thought about it that counts. We know that you are not our audience, and we are not actors here to entertain. But, it's all too easy for worship leaders to be thought of — or to think of themselves — as performers hired to dazzle you on Sundays with an excellent program, hoping for a five-star rating or stellar review on Yelp! This is one reason Presbyterians can be hesitant, even critical, of applause — because that's how people thank performers. We do prefer a hearty "Amen!" that points to the God who showed up through human vessels —even as we know that sometimes the Spirit wells up in you and applause is how you express it. That you left church having had a spiritual experience matters far more to us than whether you think we did a good job.

Worship is the most important thing we do as Christian people. We want you to do it. We want this ritual and habit of corporate worship to be realized by everyone, especially those not ready to return to the sanctuary. Worship nourishes our faith. Worship deepens our relationship to the God we know and want to know better. Worship must be guided more by the Holy Spirit than by us, that we can encourage your worship and not impede it.

The roots of Reformed worship and liturgy are grounded in the theological brilliance of our founder, John Calvin. Over time, others have shaped our understanding of it. In 1847, the Danish Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard spoke out against old ways of doing church in which congregants were observers — making them the audience. In that medieval model, worship leaders were the actors, and God was the prompter of the worship. In many modern churches today, worship still feels like a concert with excellent performance, lighting, video, sound — even theater seating. But worship isn't God's show, Kierkegaard pointed out. It's you, the congregants, who are the actors. We are more like directors who help you remember your lines. We don't perform, we prompt. You act. God is the audience, watching.

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More recently, American theologians Robert Webber and Will Willimon critiqued worship styles which turn you into passive admirers. For Willimon, people who don't engage in worship, who don't get involved in the service itself are less likely to engage in Christian activity or put faith into practice in their daily lives. Just as uninspired worship does nothing to inspire life-giving faith — passive worship equates to passive Christians. Of course we pray together, we sing together - but today there are ever more opportunities for you to participate. Whether you can read well, or can toll a bell, hold a paten of communion wafers, hand out a bulletin, dance or pray or paint, weave or sew — together we create a worship that is authentic and inspired. My gifted colleagues have taken Willimon's ideas to new levels by engaging more of you than ever.

Worship is an experience that calls us into relationship with God, a time particularly patterned so that when we leave here, that connection is fuller. Exiting those narthex doors to confront the world's needs and our personal choices extends worship into life — or as Rick Spalding used to put it in his benediction, "Our service now ... begins." And God is watching, rooting us on, and often applauding, yes — but ever asking us to be mindful of those gaps between our praise and our practice.

At a time when the threat of Assyrian conquest was looming ominously over Judah, as they prayed and sacrificed and praised the God they hoped would save them — the prophet Isaiah — in this first page in the first chapter of the first prophecy in the Old Testament brings forth a withering assault on their worship. It as if God left us a note on the virtual friendship pad: "I hate your worship. Your prayers make me sick. I loathe your music. Your sermons are a sacrilege. Who asked for your offerings? Your Holy communion stinks. I want none of it." God's angry and this polemic against bad worship is for real. So real that Isaiah begins with making an exceptionally harsh characterization. Sodom and Gomorrah were the epitome of wickedness — and their particular wickedness stemmed from, contrary to popular assumptions, greed and injustice. They oppressed the poor, failed to take care of those in need, and looked the other way for corruption. Isaiah held up the mirror and invited Judah to take a hard look at themselves. Their nation's leaders oppressed their people. Their religious leaders condoned it. Heck, they gave it cover. In a world where heavy economic burdens were imposed upon the people by their government, the tax-exempt religious professionals were in a position to benefit — and to manipulate the system — and they did. Instead of opening their hands to the poor, they further pushed them down. Instead of opening their hearts to God's people in need they turned their backs on everything the God they prayed to stood for. Instead of pursuing justice, they sheltered exploitation and gave it safe haven. Judah's failure was a facade of pious religious practice — their worship was a sham. God's review? Worship that is unconcerned with justice is obscene. And God brought the people of Israel to the brink of destruction.

Worship unconcerned with justice is obscene — a truth that has driven this congregation forward over our 196 years. We know that we can't worship a homeless man on Sunday and ignore one on Monday. Our Social Hall has sheltered countless homeless men on cold winter nights. Combatting climate change, dismantling racism, fighting for gun control, adopting a refugee family, spending weeks working together at the Alpha House shelter for homeless families — we are a congregation that tries, faithfully, and fervently to put this into practice. This is where the Michigan Anti-Slavery society was established. These are the grounds where our members have come together to protest the murders of innocent men, women and children and held vigils to inspire others to action. From WW2 Veterans, to international students, to hungry children, to Ukrainian refugees — we have opened our hands and our wallets. If you haven't read the PCUSA's recap of what happened at this year's General Assembly, I hope you will because this apple clearly belongs to that tree. We don't do it perfectly. It can be messy and working for justice for the oppressed means naming the oppressors — even when that is us — but still... we hear you God. Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. The audience that is God doesn't come here for impressive worship and excellent praise, right order or

beautiful ardor, and neither do you. God is looking for worship untethered and set free for a life of faith in which worship spills over into our actions. How we live our lives is our worship.

Even so — in the words of my friend Paul Duke, “Evil’s favorite shelter is a house of worship.” There will always be gaps between our praise and your practice. To mind those gaps is to remember, with humility, what our Black Lives Matter signs say, “we have work to do.”

Friends, God rebuked their worship while we pray that God desires ours. For here’s the irony — only in worship can we hear these words and receive them with gratitude. In worship, we humbly confess that we aren’t perfect and need help to look more honestly at ourselves. In worship, we hear the words of forgiveness that come from the One we both love and fail, words that free us to keep trying harder for that full integrity of faith and worship. In worship, we pray and praise together and find perspective, strength, direction.

Worship left Israel on the brink of destruction, but our worship brings us ever to the brink of blessing. In Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel of Luke — the message of Isaiah is confirmed. Praise and practice must be aligned but so that God’s fullest blessing can come.

Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of this in *The Message* rewrites Jesus’ complicated teaching this way: “Keep your shirts on; keep the lights on! Be like house servants waiting for their master to come back from his honeymoon, awake and ready to open the door when he arrives and knocks. Lucky the servants whom the master finds on watch! He’ll put on an apron, sit them at the table, and serve them a meal, sharing his wedding feast with them. It doesn’t matter what time of the night he arrives; they’re awake—and so blessed!”

“Be ready,” Jesus says — ready to put our faith into practice wherever God calls — and not to fear punishment — but to receive blessing. We are not to worship well and live our faith to avoid retribution — we are doing so because our lives are so enriched when we do. We are fed. We are blessed. These scriptures invite us, compel us, to look for the gaps and to mind them, to fix them, to fill them, to learn from them. Does our practice match our praise? Let us ask the audience of one.

Let us pray: Holy God, move deep within and among us that we respond to the gift of your presence and the presence of your gifts with our whole hearts, fed by you so that we can feed others, ready to go with you where you lead. Amen.