

Sunday, July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
The 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

John 4:19-26, Leviticus 4:22-29  
So, What's Worship?

The most public and visible thing that we do as a church is worship. We post the times of our worship services on a sign on the lawn. When people are curious about a church, they don't call the office to find out when Session meets. Instead, we have messages on our answering machine about the time that worship starts on Sundays, and people call around the two big days to find out when our services are. People don't visit Session meetings or committee meetings or most fellowship events to see if this could be their church; they come to worship.

And, for the last 20 years or so, churches have been arguing about worship. Actually, they've been arguing about worship much longer than that, but this is the 'discussion' that you are most familiar with. You know, the "worship wars" – traditional versus contemporary and no one really sure what either of those words mean except that they like one and despise the other. It is too bad that in the discussion most churches have gotten so into style of worship and so away from quality of worship. And the quality of worship is really at the center of our two passages today.

The passage from Leviticus describes a very mechanical form of worship that in this context we'll call traditional. It is traditional because it is the way it was always done by the Jewish people. It is also very mechanical and almost mathematical. If you sin like this (and you will) then this is what you do to make up for it. Depending on the severity and intentionality of the sin bring an offering of the appropriate size to the priest. The priest will prepare the offering and present the offering to God in your presence, and your slate will be wiped clean. Don't worry, if you forget one of your sins, you'll sin enough that you'll be back very often to repeat this task. And you don't even have to go all the way in – only the high priest can go in to the holy of holies, so the rest of us schmucks don't even have to get that close to God Almighty to begin with.

See, nice and neat, very clean – the reason you come to worship is because you need to make a sacrifice, the reason you need to make a sacrifice is because you sin, and in one simple transaction at the temple we can clear away those sins until the next time you screw up. See you soon!

Doesn't it seem like that's missing something? To me, this makes for a very small God who is only interested in forgiveness for the same price as I can get a very low quality set of steak knives on late night infomercials. That's right folks, if you act now, we'll also throw in temporary forgiveness and amnesty for your past actions – all for the low, low price of one goat. I think it makes God sound like a used car dealer. And that's not exactly the God I know, trust and proclaim as revealed in Jesus Christ.

That God speaks to us as he speaks to the woman at the well, correction, the *Samaritan* woman at the well. By definition a sinner, by definition, less than

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he, by definition not one for God's chosen to consort with – and yet Jesus does. But more than that, he speaks to someone who would not be allowed to come into the temple to offer the sacrifices we've already talked about. (As a woman and a Samaritan, she really doesn't count.) And she knows that she would not be welcome, and she knows where 'traditional' worship would have her worship. But that is a part of her challenge to the Christ - Where do we worship, which is essentially who worships right – us or them?

And, as usual Jesus does not answer the question he's asked, or at least not in the way the questioner would like him to. Jesus replies that God is looking for people to worship in spirit and in truth. God is not looking for people who just want to assuage their consciences with a happy little offering of scapegoat. God is looking for people to worship in spirit and in truth.

God is looking to go beyond the worship wars, beyond traditional versus contemporary to true worship. God wants us to worship, to come ourselves, into God's presence and meet God again. God wants us to encounter God in our own lives – not just on some mountain or in some temple. We worship God in the encounters we have with one another and with whether or not we show them who God is. And we can show the world who God is in old hymns or new music, prayer and praise or liturgical smells and bells. The transformation that God calls us to is to worship of God, not worship of form. Worship of the one who gives life, not sounds and songs. Worship of a God who calls us to worship – all of us – and who forgives us once and for all.