

Imagine: It's a crisp fall Sunday morning. All across the country people are getting ready. They're dressing for the occasion. They're gathering with fellow believers. They're eating and drinking together. They're singing or waving their hands, and if the spirit moves them, they might even start to dance. To outsiders, their behavior might look odd – maybe a little irrational or obsessed. But for these faithful people, this is a way of life. Who are all these hand-waving, special-clothes-wearing, spirit-filled folks? Not church-goers; football fans. Like the saying goes: *you can worship anywhere*.

Zumbro's focus for 2012 is *creating a place for all to worship*. It's a follow-up to our 2011 focus, *creating a place for all to belong*. We'll be focusing on worship this year in part because having a singular objective unifies us as a congregation. It stretches us to go deep and think big about what God is up to here. But it's also because worship is the most important thing we do to stay connected to God. We want our life together to be an energizing, inspiring encounter with the holy. But most of all, we want it to be a heartfelt expression of our love and devotion to God.

So when you hear the word *worship*, what comes to mind? Sitting in a pew, listening to the choir or the sermon? A chance to recharge your batteries? Something to pass the time before going out to brunch? We tend to associate the word *worship* with the Sunday morning service, but really, worship is anything we do that directly gives praise to God. Everything we do – the songs, the prayers, the offering, the liturgy – everything is meant to be a way for us to show God love.

Is that why you're here today? To show your love for God? Maybe. Some of you probably came to hear the music or to see a friendly face. Maybe you came hoping for a

few words you could take along to get you through the week. Maybe came because it feels somehow like a good thing to do. Or maybe you're not quite sure why you're here. Our reasons for gathering are as varied as we are. But I think we're also all here because we have a need to seek out time with God.

That need for time with God comes not from our instincts, by the way, but from God. We are drawn to the Lord because God has made us that way. Paul made this case in Athens: "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him ... though he is not far from each one of us." (Acts 17:27) And St. Augustine wrote, "Lord, you have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." (*Confessions*) Sometimes people describe this as a *God-shaped hole inside of you that longs to be filled*. It's that sense that despite our best efforts and illusion of control, there is something bigger, more powerful than us. And the amazing thing is, that *something* wants your love and attention. God wants your heart.

That's meant to be the center of our worship experience: it's our way of giving God our hearts, of saying *I love you*. Now you can show God's love in lots of ways – knitting prayer shawls and visiting shut-ins and collecting food for Channel One. But those things are for the world. Our time in worship isn't for us; it's for God. And it's meant to be a verb. It is not something that is done to us or for us. It is done by us.

When Mark Allen Powell was serving as an interim pastor, the church council asked him to devote his time to visiting members who'd become inactive. His job was to try and convince them to come back to church. He made a lot of visits. He heard a lot of reasons why people stopped attending. But the one thing they had in common was this: All the people he visited told him, in one way or another, that they quit coming to church

because they weren't 'getting out of it' what they thought they should get out of it. That surprised Powell, because, he writes, "when I was a child, my mother always told me, 'we're going to church to worship God.' I never thought I was supposed to get anything out of it."

I'm not sure where this idea came from that worship was meant for our benefit. Perhaps it's a byproduct of our consumer culture. I remember visiting my cousins when I was in seminary. At the time, their kids were 3 and 4 years old. We went together to church. It was, as you can imagine, a little chaotic. Afterwards, my cousin Cathy confessed that one more than one occasion, she'd wondered why she kept suffering through Sunday mornings. *This isn't worth it!* she said to herself. But then one day it came to her, crystal clear, like a voice in her head: *this is totally worth it. You're teaching your kids that this is important for you, the voice said. You're spending time with me.*

Now, what's interesting is that for Cathy, that realization came while she was in the middle of a particularly trying Sunday morning. God was speaking to her, right when she needed to hear him most. That's what happens when we bring our God our hearts in worship. Worship is about moving God out of our heads and into our hearts. It's about bringing everything we are – our fears and fragility, our struggles and our successes – and laying them on the altar before God and saying, *take them, Lord. Take me just as I am. Thank you for loving me. I need you. I love you. I am yours.*

We should come to worship expecting to encounter the holy – expecting to meet Jesus here. Because when we do – when we feel God close by, when we're brought to tears by a song or a prayer – something happens. God speaks – in a tug or an idea or an urge to get up and do something. And we're filled with the awesome sense that we're

part of something bigger and greater and more powerful than anything we in our own small way could ever know.

Worship is meant to be a chance to share deeply – with body and soul, with heart and mind, with all our senses – to feel connected with our creator and to tell God *I love you*. If worship has simply become part of your routine, the thought of actually feeling God's presence might sound as foolish as the sight of grownups in purple and gold paint with horn hats on their heads. But remember, God loves you. He wants your heart.

When you love someone, you never get tired of telling them. And you never get tired of hearing them tell you it back. That's what we're going to do this year as we create a place for all to worship. We're going to encounter the holy. We're going to be changed. We're going to share God's love in lots and lots of ways. And there's more than enough of that to go around. Amen.