My wife Lisa and I have not been back to our alma mater, the University of Michigan, in about 15 years. A month ago we decided to return to Ann Arbor, visit college friends and see a football game. It was a night game – 7 p.m. start. We bought plane tickets that would get us there at 3 p.m. Four hours is plenty of time. When we arrived at the Trenton airport we discovered the plane was delayed two hours. When the plane landed in Detroit we had two hours to kickoff. When we arrived at the rental car desk to pick up our reserved vehicle they said, “We are out of cars. You can wait two hours or you can go to our competitors.” We went to the competition and they said, “We don’t have any cars.” Somehow, when I called their headquarters and used my preacher voice, they suddenly found one. Now we had one hour to kickoff. We threw our stuff in the hotel room, drove into town, and found a parking place two miles away with only twenty minutes to kick off. Finally, we got on line to get in the stadium minutes before kickoff. “I can’t believe it, we’re going to make it!” Then a gatekeeper said to my wife, “Sorry ma’am you have to check your bag.” And that’s how we missed the kickoff.

When you come late to a game at Michigan Stadium it’s difficult to squeeze in. In that stadium there were over 113,000 people – it’s the largest gathering of humans in the United States on that day. That’s why they call it “The Big House.” How do they get so many people in one place? They don’t have seats. They have benches with numbers. You are supposed to sit on your number. When we were students we used to joke that to get more people into the stadium they simply painted the numbers closer together. You have no personal space. When everyone stands up, you stand up too whether you want to or not. All except one lady sitting next to my wife. She was a serious fan. She was covered in the school colors. Yet she told Lisa, “This is a non-standing section.” She made it clear she did not go for those people who stand and block your view. Then she said to my wife, “Here’s a tip deary. While everyone’s standing, you need to sit down first so you can get back on your number.”

Like all college games, it was loud, boisterous, and fun. People raised their hands, sang songs, clapped, shouted, stood up and sat down. This was an especially exciting game because the Wolverines, who are having a terrible season, actually won…against a team that shall not be named…because I want to remain alive.

As I took in the joy of that game in Michigan Stadium it occurred to me: this is worship. Think of the sacrifices I made to get there. I rearranged my schedule, took off from work, paid for plane and game tickets, raced there to be on time, invested four hours and would have stayed longer, shouted and cheered with 113,000 complete strangers, stood, clapped, sang, raised my hands with enthusiasm and joy, got to bed around midnight and wanted to tell all my friends about it.
Now how does that compare to what we call worship in churches across the country? I know none of the following things happen at Woodside, but let me share what pastors tell me they see at their churches. If the weather is good and there are no other things on the schedule they’ll drive the short distance to the church building, arriving in their seats about fifteen after the service starts. Even though it’s free they may complain that the pastor is always asking for money. They don’t like to sit near strangers. They may stand occasionally and sing quietly, but they prefer not to clap, raise hands, shout or move in any way. They really hope it doesn’t go over an hour and they avoid telling their friends about the worship service because it’s not polite to talk about religion in public. It’s better to stick to something safe – like football.

I sincerely want to thank you Woodside because you do put your heart into worship. In this congregation, people feel free to pray quietly and aloud, to silently meditate and raise their hands, to stand, sit, clap and even say an occasional, “Amen!” You are a very unique people of God. When Presbyterians visit from other churches they say to me, “You guys don’t worship like other Presbyterians. What are you?” “Just people in love with Jesus,” I reply.

That’s what worship is: loving God. Today in our sermon series on worship, “Go Beyond,” I want to challenge you to go beyond where you are with worship. Our focus today is going beyond the limits we place on worship. Scripture teaches us that when it comes to worship there should be **No Limit on Variety**. There is a time for silence before God. Psalm 46:10 says,

> “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” (Psalm 46:10).

The prophet Habakkuk tells us:

> The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him. (Habakkuk 2:20)

So it is certainly important, at times, to be silent before God. But there is also a time for celebration. Worship in the Temple was also loud and boisterous. The last Psalm says:

> Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with the timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. (Psalm 150:1, 3-6)

They worshiped God with all they got! There was singing, shouting, cymbals, swirling dances and every kind of instrument. All this shows there is a place for variety in worship. That is what I love about Woodside. There is no limit to the variety of ways we worship. We have classic, celebration and café styles of worship. We worship in a sanctuary, a vineyard and a warehouse. We worship God with hymns and songs, with choirs and bands, with organ, guitars, drums, violins, flute, trumpets, trombones, bells and occasionally even a bag pipe. The Lord loves variety in worship. Imagine what it is
like for Jesus to hear His name praised with songs in Korean, Chinese, Hindi, Arabic, Swahili, German, Spanish, English and a thousand other languages. This is why it is so silly to say there is only one correct style of worship. Thankfully Woodside has avoided the worship wars over whether traditional or contemporary is the right way to worship God. There is no limit on the variety. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!

The Scriptures also teach us that in worship there is **no limit on enthusiasm**. One of the greatest worship leaders in the Bible is King David. In addition to his many military victories, David played the harp and wrote many of the psalms – the songs sung during worship in the Temple. When David captured Jerusalem, the final step to making it his new capital city was to bring in the Ark of God. David longed to have it rest in his capital and bless his kingdom.

Now King David was told, “The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God.” So David went down and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-Edom to the City of David with rejoicing. When those who were carrying the ark of the LORD had taken six steps, he sacrificed a bull and a fattened calf. David, wearing a linen ephod, danced before the LORD with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouts and the sound of trumpets. (2 Samuel 6:12-15).

This was the greatest parade anyone had ever seen. The Ark, crafted during Moses’ time, contained the original Ten Commandments. It was the visible sign of God’s presence. And it was powerful – if you don’t believe me just ask Indiana Jones. This is one of the most triumphant days in the history of Israel. Yet the great and glorious king of Israel does something unexpected. He takes off his regal robes and begins to dance before the Ark in a linen loin cloth. A few shocked elders may have reached for their smelling salts. Yet the multitudes along the parade route cheer him on. He twists and turns, spins and spirals, lunges and leaps to the music. He seems possessed and, in a way, he is. Filled with the Spirit, David praises God with his dance. He loses track of the crowds around him and, frankly, doesn’t care what they think. It is all for the Lord. The crowds love it. They shout for more. When the Ark finally arrives in Jerusalem, David gives food to everyone in the city: a loaf of bread, a cake of dates, a cake of raisins and crème brûlée French toast. They all go home to their families and celebrate this glorious day.

When David returns home to celebrate with Michal his wife, he gets blindsided. As the ark of the LORD was entering the City of David, Michal daughter of Saul watched from a window. And when she saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, she despised him in her heart. When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, “How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!” (2 Samuel 6:16, 20)
Do you feel the sarcasm? With the air of snobbish nobility she pulls out all the weapons of shame.

- You exposed yourself.
- You lowered yourself to the level of a slave.
- You acted like low-life, low class, riff-raff.
- My father the king would never have acted that way.
- You’re not fit to be king.

She tries to put a limit on his enthusiasm. Michal points out all the ways he embarrassed himself by dancing before the crowds. But David refuses to fall for it. His dance was not to impress people but to praise the Lord.

David said to Michal, “It was before the LORD, who chose me rather than your father or anyone from his house when he appointed me ruler over the LORD’s people Israel—I will celebrate before the LORD. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor.” (2 Samuel 6:21-22).

David danced for the Lord and the Lord alone. He did not care what others thought. He did not listen to any condemning voices within. It did not matter if the whole world thought he was undignified. How could he do this? He knew God was pleased with him and God loved him. And he loved the Lord. The joy of the Lord was his strength. That’s what made him dance with all his might.

Christians ought to be the most joyful people on earth. We believe Jesus died for our sins, we know He has set us free from our faults, we look forward to eternal life. We should be singing and shouting for the Lord in the most raucous, undignified dance of all. But when you look at the way we worship God, you’d think someone died. Sometimes we worship quietly because we’re going through a tough time. That’s understandable. But it can’t be every week. And one of the best ways to get out of depression is to give gratitude and joy to God for all His blessings.

I loved cheering, shouting and jumping up and down for my team in Michigan. I’m sure you love to do the same for your team. And none of us worry about what others think. But let’s face it - all that cheering and undignified joy is just for a game. When we worship we are cheering for Jesus, the greatest Victor of all. Nothing bad will happen if you sing out loud, clap, raise your hands, cry out to the Lord and even dance. We Presbyterians are called the “Frozen Chosen” because we are so dignified in our worship. But I don’t think we’re worried about dignity. It’s disdain. We don’t want the other people in the sanctuary to think we are crazy. That kind of enthusiasm is only acceptable at football games. Do you know what the word “enthusiasm” means? God in you. We have God the Holy Spirit in us but we are keeping a lid on Him. The only way to take the limit off our enthusiasm is if everyone has permission to let go and worship the Lord with all your might. Now you don’t have to do anything different in this worship service than
you’ve always done. But would you please turn to the people on either side of you and say, “You have my permission to go wild for Jesus. Go for it.”

Get undignified. Let the joy flow. Why? So we can be like a football game? No. So we can focus on God and forget about what other people think of us. So we can please God and stop trying to please people. So we can remember God and forget about ourselves. Wherever you are today, I invite you to go beyond that limit and try something new. Try singing louder. Try praying out loud. Try clapping. Try raising your hands the way they prayed in Jesus day. Try saying: “Hallelujah” or “Amen” the way they prayed in David’s day. Try dancing for joy.

When people are in love they don’t keep it to themselves. They show it on the outside. My wife and I are high school sweethearts. We first started dating on December 1, 1978 – almost 36 years ago. In the first few months, Lisa was shy about holding my hand in the hallways at school. She didn’t want to give me a kiss before we went to our classes. I asked her about this and she admitted she was little embarrassed. When she finally got over worrying about what others thought and gave me a kiss, that’s when I knew she loved me. The fact that this was right before the principal announced a new rule banning public displays of affection is just a coincidence. When we worship the Lord outwardly, with enthusiasm, we enter a deeper relationship with Him. We take the limit off our enthusiasm. We take the lid off our love.

We all need to worship like Wanda. Pastor and author Mark Buchanan tells the story of joy that unfolded in one worship service. For eight months, Wanda, a member of his church, was making good progress in her recovery from alcoholism. She took the Alpha course and attended a 12-step group. Most of all, she was able to get her kids back. Things were going well. Then they didn’t. She was in and out – mostly out – of rehab. Then she vanished.

Finally, one day she called up Pastor Buchanan. She was sober after a year in rehab in Vancouver. She was getting out next week and she had one question. “Could she come home?” On her first Sunday back, Pastor Mark initially didn’t recognize her. She looked healthy, whole.

I was preaching on the ten lepers Jesus healed, and the one, a Samaritan, who returned to give thanks. I said that anyone who has been cleansed by Jesus, who wants to be made whole by him, worships at his feet in deep thankfulness, in utmost desperation. They have nowhere else they want to go. And then, to close, I reminded people we have a tradition at our church: anyone can come up to the front and pray with one of our prayer ministers.

Wanda came forward. But she didn't go to a prayer minister. She walked onto the platform, between the guitarist and the drummer, and stretched her hands heavenward. She worshiped like One Leper returning. A woman who didn't know her, and who isn't on the prayer team, walked up, put her arm around her, and worshiped, too.
Then—you could hear it—all of us worshiped with deeper thankfulness, out of greater desperation.¹

It’s time to take off the limits and love the Lord.