Dear Friends in Christ, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen!

As I begin this morning’s message called “When Religion Kills Authentic Worship” I want to let you know I will be borrowing some of my thoughts from another Pastor by the name of Andy Stanley because I think he did such a good job talking about intimacy with God. And when I think of what Authentic Worship looks like, it has nothing to do with the style or volume of music, the size of the church or anything like that, authentic worship has to do with drawing closer to God or you might say more intimacy with God. I know there’s a lot of baggage around that word intimate some think of it as kind of mushy or touchy feely but it’s really is about getting to that place where our worship of God is genuine and authentic rather than just checking off another religious box—because when our worship becomes just checking off another religious box it kills authentic worship.

You’ve probably heard the phrase “the friend zone”. It’s the phrase to describe a dating relationship where someone is really into another person and they’ve let them know they’d like the relationship to go to the next level but they get shut down and relegated to the “friend zone”. What they mean is they’re just not as into you in the same way you’re into them.
It doesn’t just have to be a dating relationship. There are other kinds of relationships where someone wants a certain kind of relation, whether it’s person or professional but for a lot of reasons it’s just not going to happen. It doesn’t mean the relationship is antagonistic, everybody’s cordial, polite and kind, it’s just that the relationship is never going any deeper. If you’ve ever been the one who wanted a relationship to go deeper and it doesn’t it’s frustrating because there’s nothing you can do to force somebody to go there with you.

The entire Bible, cover to cover presents God as one who wants to go deeper with us, one who desires an intimate relationship with us and inviters us to have an intimate and deeper faith. For some, the word “intimacy” is frightening or scary or too mushy or feelings based. So if the word intimacy doesn’t work for you just replace it with the word authentic and know that Scripture paints a picture of God wanting to have an authentic relationship with us.

The OT reminds us that we’re created in God’s image, in the reading for Today Jesus is praying for future believers and while praying for unity he says

“Father just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so the world may believe…I in them and you in me...Righteous Father, through the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you know to them, and will continue to make you know in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” I know it’s wordy but it
paints a picture of God and Jesus being in us and us in them and being made in God’s image it’s a pretty intimate or authentic relationship that we’ve been created for.

Yet it’s so easy for there to be a boundary between us and God that keeps a relationship with God at arm’s length, it’s respectful and cordial but a little distant. You might say it puts God in the friend zone, but God desires so much more for us. So how does it get to the point where we’re satisfied with “Friend Zoning God?”

It happens when we’re more committed to religion than we are to The Lord. Here’s what I mean by that. When we allow faith in God to become a formula with boxes to check rather than a God to get to know intimately we’ve become more committed to religion than to God and God will always be at arms distance. We’ll be respectful with God and we’ll check our boxes as a way of thinking we’re doing our duty but we’ll miss out on that intimacy with God. Go to church every now and then or even regularly-check, Have a Bible out somewhere at home maybe-check, Go to confirmation or get my kid to confirmation-check, need a baptism wedding or funeral-check-----and it’s all very respectful and cordial and they are all good and valuable and super meaningful things, but if they are just boxes to check---if they’re our way of being polite and respectful to God and friend zoning God then they get in the way of authentic or intimate worship.
And here’s what happens when people stay religious “box checkers” long enough— they become angry and judgmental because other people aren’t checking the same boxes as often as they think they should or they’re checking different boxes. And every denomination or church has their own boxes to check. You see, checking boxes makes religion about getting God to do stuff for me and ultimately it’s very self-centered. Authentic worship gets me out of the way because it’s all about God.

Jesus even warned his disciples about religious people checking boxes in John 16:1-3 “All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me.” He’s warning them that people will go to extremes in the name of religion because they don’t know the Father. And that is of course one of the great critiques of religion and it’s true.

But worship, authentic worship or you might say intimate worship is about knowing The Father and worshipping God, not checking boxes, hoping that if you check enough you’re a good enough person. Authentic worship is really about getting out of our own way and letting go of our boxes long enough to simply enjoy God.
So what does an authentic or intimate relationship with God look like?

1) It takes time. Any good relationship you have there’s some quality time involved and often it’s unstructured. It might involve going somewhere in the car, or just hanging out. It’s kind of an organic thing. I have to tell you if a relationship with God is just going to church and that’s the box we check and there’s no time to just hang out or have conversation at some other time it’s pretty easy to be a box checker. And those conversations can take place anywhere not just at church. Even Jesus often went off by himself to be with God. I invite and encourage you to take some unstructured time outside of church to be with God.

2) Intimacy or authenticity with God involves some transparency. It involves quit being polite with God and being honest. Read the psalms it’s filled with a lot of honest talk. When you confess or when you talk to God about tough times or whatever it is---God doesn’t sit back and go “Oh Really, I didn’t know that, I’m shocked” But transparency is pretty important. Any good and healthy relationship you’re a part of is pretty transparent, it’s the same with The Lord. I invite and encourage you to be more intentional about being transparent with God it can be freeing.

3) And here’s one where somebody’s gonna get hung up on the word I’m going to use: Submission. Mutual Submission to quote Andy Stanley is
the most powerful relational dynamic. When you’ve got two people who are committed to each other, who are going to harness all of their best stuff for the best interest of the other person it’s incredibly powerful.

The reason it’s easy to be afraid to even think about submitting to God is first of all it’s one of those words that has a lot of baggage but also because it takes God out of the “FRIEND ZONE” and takes our faith beyond being just cordial and respectful to being more intimate or authentic.

But here’s the deal God has already made the first move towards you, that’s exactly what Lent and especially Holy Week and Easter are about. It’s as if he’s saying I’m gonna go first because I’m more concerned about your sin, and your stuff than my own comfort. So in a very real way God’s made the first move and submitted to you as an invitation for you to move beyond religion and box checking.

It’s so tempting to think that if we move beyond religion and box checking and go a little deeper with God that he’s gonna huff and puff and blow our house down but that’s not true. It says he’s going to stand at the door and knock. The one thing he’ll never do is force his way in and that’s way different than religion. Because religion doesn’t open the door but intimacy and authenticity with God does.
It’s as if Jesus says I know you went out church and that’s good, I know you checked the other religious boxes that’s good because those are all good tools and habits but there not a substitute for me being in you and you being in me.

Yea, box checking religion can be done with the best of intentions because they can be the things we know should do. But they can get in the way of authentic worship when they become more important than developing that closeness with God. It’s not about emotion or lack of emotion or music style, or being a hipster or non- it’s not about being a hipster, it’s not about a big church or a small church, it’s not about being a consumer of religion like we are a consumer of other consumer products in life. It’s about when we’re checking off our religious boxes, hearing Jesus knock and putting down our pen and paper and inviting him in. And as we spend time with him we become closer and get to know the real Jesus and we reveal our real selves to him and we get to marvel how deep the friendship can be. And folks that’s the Jesus we worship this morning.