

Worship: Why Do It?

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*Fueled
by a million
man-made
wings of fire-
the rocket tore a tunnel
through the sky-
and everybody cheered.
Fueled
only by a thought from God-
the seedling
urged its way
through thicknesses of black-
and as it pierced
the heavy ceiling of the soil-
and launched itself
up into outer space -
no
one
even
clapped.*

—“Fueled,” by Marcie Hans

Ancient Witness: Mark 10:17-18

As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

One of my favorite writers, Parker Palmer, once said:

I had thought that living spiritually required a resolution of all contraries and tensions...

But then he concluded,

Perhaps contractions are not impediments to the spiritual life, but an integral part of it. Through them we learn that the power for life comes from God, not us.

Palmer continues,

The spiritual journey sharpens and magnifies our sense of contradiction. And should it not be so? The wholeness of the Spirit contrasts dramatically with the brokenness of our persons and our world.

But there's a part of us that is frustrated by this, that doesn't want contradiction, that doesn't to live with the questions, that wants resolution, that wants the comfort of certainty.

For most of the spiritual teachers that I've read, including Jesus, the primary purpose of the sacred writings, laws and traditions was not to give answers, but to help people wake up and become aware, alive to the presence of the Divine, of God.

Former director of The Center for Progressive Christianity, Jim Adams, wrote,

According to the gospels, Jesus rarely gave a straight answer to a straight question. Instead he responded with another question or told a puzzling story. At the risk of disappointing his questioners, Jesus put them in a position of having to think for themselves...Jesus would not provide absolute answers because answers, by providing false confidence and security, become barriers to an awareness of God. Answers become substitutes for God.

Answers become substitutes for God! It takes courage to have questions and to live with mystery.

And this, it seems to me, is part of what we do each Sunday. We are learning to love the Holy Mystery some of us refer to as "God."

And so this morning I want us to think about, what is worship?

You know, every Sunday it says at the top of the bulletin, "worship." What is it? If you're going to try to describe it to someone who has absolutely no idea, what would you say?

You can think of the Christian path as being a balanced spiritual diet. There are these *essential* food groups:

- study, reflection and prayer
- being an active part of a church that offers mutual support and encouragement
- service to others, deeds of compassion and work toward justice
- public worship on a regular basis

If we are serious about pursuing the Christian path, we need *each one* of these, as much as we are able, for a healthy diet.

So for our spiritual growth and well-being, worship is an essential aspect of the Christian faith. It's not about entertainment. Worship is about practicing our awareness. It's about opening up to the comforting, challenging and transforming presence of the Sacred Reality. It's about proclaiming and responding. Worship is not about getting; it's about giving. It's not a performance; we don't do it for adulation. It's about putting oneself at the disposal of the Divine. And the object of worship is always God.

Now making God or the Sacred our ultimate priority in our lives is a very, very difficult thing to do! There are lots of things competing for that number one spot. And so we practice putting the Sacred, the Divine, God at that top spot. It requires practice, commitment, determination—all that and much more. And yet it is the basic foundation of the religious life. It's the first two of the 10 commandments.

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is

on earth beneath that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. (Exodus 20:1-5a)

Now if we don't take this literally we can understand what is going on here. The question is not *if* we worship. The question is *what* we worship. We all have things to which we give our top allegiance. We each have our top priorities. To be human is to struggle with misplaced priorities. As individuals and as faith communities, we need continual reminding and encouragement to keep God, the Sacred as the number one priority of our lives.

What other reasons? Well, when we don't go to corporate worship, those who are left behind miss us and are diminished, and the worship, itself, is diminished by our absence. So a major reason why we go is for other people and for the well-being of the community itself. Not necessarily for me. Through the years I have heard people say that they don't go to worship because they "don't get anything out of it." Now "getting something out" of worship is probably a laudable goal, but it is by no means the only reason one should participate in worship. It's not even near the top of the list.

I think that the first reason, from my perspective, we are to worship is that it is simply the right thing, from a religious and spiritual perspective, to do. It is an act that is good in and of itself, beyond calculation. It doesn't need to fill any other purpose. Focusing upon the Sacred as the most important thing in the universe doesn't have to be justified as serving anything else. It's not just a means to an end; it's an end in itself.

And a second reason to participate is because you care about the others in the community. (We also care about the world; and worship is our public witness. We give our collective proclamation to the world about what the preeminence of the Holy is all about.) Because we care about the world, we do that. It is about caring enough to help others who are trying to focus upon God as the most important thing in their lives. We go to encourage and help others in the faith community. And so here's the paradox: the more we go to get, the less we will probably receive; and the more we go to give, that is for self-less reasons, the more we receive. So the focus is not upon oneself or one's own needs but upon the needs of others and the Sacred.

And so, it seems to me, this is what worship is—when we practice as a community putting the Divine as number one in our lives and what that means, what that implies. It is about serving this Presence in all that we do and helping others do the same, helping others make the same kind of priorities. So like Jesus, we come not to be served but to serve. That is why we call it a *service*. And it is in the serving that we are served. It is in the giving that we receive, if it's done authentically from that perspective.

One of my favorite discussions about worship was done by an 18th century Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. O.K., I can see your eyes glaze over. But Kierkegaard had some helpful things to say about worship, and I'm just going to throw this out there to see what you think.

He said that the tendency is for the congregation to think of the preacher and the musicians as actors or entertainers on the stage, and to think of themselves as the audience. And this is very understandable the way things are configured. Kierkegaard said that a church worship service is not like this, it is not like a theatre performance. This is nothing against theater performance, it's just not the same. Rather, in church worship, think about everything here as the stage. God is the audience, the people are the actors and the preacher and the choir are the prompters behind the scenes. He was emphasizing that the people are active participants, not passive recipients. We are actively participating—that's the goal of worship. Everyone is rolling up their sleeves and working

hard. In fact, the word “liturgy” comes from the Greek word “to work.” Everyone contributes; everyone gives of themselves in this model.

Now the shape and architecture of most church buildings often encourages this “theatre mentality.” Particularly if you see some of the modern mega-churches, they have stage lights, and it really is like a show. And this is part of our culture, something we need to cop to and deal with. So if we naturally think of this (chancel) as the stage area, it would be cool sometime to have everybody come up and stand here, doing worship and look out there. Because I think that is emotionally what we should be doing.

The idea is that God is the object of worship. The object is not our feelings, whether we feel good or inspired or happy or entertained or satisfied. But our culture has never been so entertainment conscious as it is today. And so this makes it very difficult. Again, this is my perspective.

Now in the Christian New Testament they talk about this more from a communal perspective. That the focus is not on oneself but really upon the community. One asks not, “What’s in it for me?” One asks, “What’s in it for the group? What’s in it for others?” When worship becomes something that we use to get something—even if what we want to get is a very good thing—then we have lost the proper focus of worship. True worship happens when we practice giving up our “self.”

The Buddhists talk about this, the mystics talk about this—giving up you “self.” As Wayne Dyer said, we always have this choice. We can either become a host to God or a hostage to our ego. And so in worship we practice being a host to God and not a hostage to our ego.

Worship isn’t about declaring anything good or bad. Sure, we make these distinctions but that’s not worship. That’s ultimately a function of our ego, and worship is more than that. Worship is not about filling ourselves with what we believe we need.

In the Christian tradition, it seems to me, we don’t even worship Jesus, even though most Christian churches don’t realize this. In the passage we read today Jesus himself clearly did not want to be worshipped or to be the object of adoration. “Don’t call me good,” he said. “Only God is good.” Everything he was about was focusing on the Divine, upon God, upon the Sacred. He was saying, “It’s not about me,” and in worship it’s not about us.

The true object of worship is the Beyond, the Holy Mystery, the Sacred. The object is not any judgment of right or wrong, not any evaluation of good or bad, not any preference of what is beautiful, it’s not even an idea of justice or kindness. It’s the Sacred Reality that is present in everything, present in the good and the bad, the just and unjust, the awesome and the mundane, perhaps particularly in the mundane. And this is revealed when we empty ourselves.

There was this radical Southern Baptist preacher and writer I liked, he name was Will Campbell. Someone once asked him what he got out of worship. And he looked kind of shocked to even hear the question, and then he said, “I assume that I don’t have to get anything out of it.” What I’m talking about is this paradox: it is by going in with an attitude of giving that we receive. If we go in with the attitude of receiving, grasping and getting, we’re not going to end up with much. If we make worship a means to an end, that is, a way to be inspired or even more faithful, though those are good things, then we will lose it. It’s in the losing that we find. It is going in with the sole purpose of loving God and the person next to you that your faith will be strengthened and we get something.

This is an extension of that great paradox of faith that Jesus talked about when he said several times,

“If you seek to save your life then you will lose it.” What a great statement of what worship is. “And if you seek to lose your life, you’ll find it.” You’ll find it. That’s what I think we’re practicing—practicing how to do that. If one seeks merely spiritual inspiration, one’s not going to find it. If one seeks simply to worship and strengthen others, then you’re going to find it.

In another part of the Christian New Testament it says that Jesus “emptied himself” and “humbled himself” and therefore was highly exalted. He demoted himself and therefore he was promoted, says one translation. It means to look beyond oneself, to let go of oneself. Jesus practiced this. This was his practice. He practiced thinking of others, instead. “Taking the form of a servant,” it says. This is an important message for those who wish to follow this way, this path.

And so if we come together primarily concerned with ourselves, we’re not going to find it. But if we come with a self-less attitude, aligning ourselves with the Divine, being there for those next to us, then we’ll find it.

When I think about the main reason for going to worship, it’s because of others. Because if I’m not there, others are going to miss me, others will be diminished.

This reminds me of a passage from Alice Walker’s book, *The Color Purple*,

She say, Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church. I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought with me. And I think all the other folks did, too. They come to church to share God, not find God.

It is in the sharing that we find. It is in the emptying that we become full. It is by practicing humility, by demoting ourselves that we are promoted and exalted.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)