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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Z39
18 Pentecost (Proper 23C) 8:30 a.m. & 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 13 October 2019

Jeremiah 29:1, 4-

Psalms 66:1-11

2 Timothy 2:8-15

Luke 17:11-19

Why Worship?

"Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17).

1. Why is it important to go to church? Why do we worship God? We know the answer to this question in an instinctual and subconscious way. But if we are going to talk to anyone about what really matters to us we need to put this into words.

We should be able to talk about why faith matters today as Turkish forces kill our former allies in Northern Syria, as the branches of federal government war against each other, as rolling power outages somehow surprise us into remembering that humans are altering the climate in every place on the planet. Jesus in the Gospel of Luke says a great deal about faith.

In today's Gospel Jesus travels the last part of his journey to Jerusalem. At the beginning of this trip Jesus and his friends were refused hospitality in a Samaritan village (Lk. 9:51-56). In their humiliation and anger the disciples said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Jesus reprimands them. Obviously they have a long way to go. Worship is not about setting apart good people like us from bad people like them.

Jesus got into trouble in his hometown when he said this at the beginning of his public ministry. That day in the synagogue Jesus alluded to a story about how the prophet Elijah healed Naaman, a foreign general suffering from leprosy. The crowd became so angry that they tried to kill him (Lk. 4). For Jesus worship and faith are not primarily about national or religious identity.

Jesus is clear about this and frequently refers in positive terms to the people his own nation regard as the enemy – the Samaritans. Who are the Samaritans? They are the northern people who are descendants of intermarriage between Jews who were left behind after elites were exiled in Babylon and the conquering Assyrian invaders. Samaritans shared a similar culture and even some overlapping scripture but worship in a different temple. Although the Samaritans and Jews seem to share so much, the two peoples regarded each other as enemies.¹

The comedian Trevor Noah in his autobiography *Born a Crime* points out how our worst conflicts are not with people who we see as completely different from us. We have our most bitter disagreements with people who are somewhat similar but who we perceive as having somehow betrayed our basic principles. This dynamic characterized the situation when Anglicans in Africa condemned the American church for embracing LGBTQ people ten years ago. Our similarities made it a hotter conflict than if we had been completely different.

2. In the Gospel of Luke As Jesus passes through the borderland between Samaria and Galilee, between his ministry in the countryside and the temple, ten lepers come to meet him. Keeping with the normal practice these outcasts stop at a distance from Jesus and lifting up their voices they call out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" (Lk. 17). Jesus tells them to go to the temple and present themselves to the priest. As they go they are healed. Nine of them go on but one audacious Samaritan who has been ostracized and cast out does something remarkable. He praises God, comes right up to Jesus, throws himself on the ground and thanks him.

Before we go further I want to point out something that is easy to miss. This language of turning and praising God comes up at important points in the Gospel of Luke as an indicator of faith. At the birth of Jesus, after meeting the holy family, the shepherds "returned glorifying God for all that they had heard and seen" (Lk. 2:20). Then at the very end of the Gospel the disciples, "returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God" (Lk. 24).

This turning and praising God are also what set this foreigner apart. Jesus points out that the others did not return and give praise to God. Jesus seems moved by this courageous Samaritan. He says, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (Lk. 17).

All ten lepers heard Jesus' instructions. They trusted him and obeyed. But faith is more than hearing, trusting, obeying or even receiving God's healing. It has something to do with returning and praising God.

3. Many of us have memorized the summary of faith. We call it the Great Commandment and inherited from our Jewish brothers and sisters (Deut. 6:5ff). It has two dimensions. The first is, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind." And the second dimension is that we are to love our neighbor as we love our selves (Lk. 10:27).

When a young lawyer asks Jesus what does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself, Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan. You remember it. A man is beaten nearly to death by thieves and left by the roadside. His people's religious leaders pass by on the other side of the road. But the one who his people regard as an enemy, a Samaritan, picks him up and nurses him back to health. A neighbor is one who risks crossing social boundaries to help. In this way Jesus explains the second dimension of the Great Commandment.

If the Good Samaritan is Jesus' explanation of the second dimension, this story of the Thankful Samaritan is his answer to the first dimension of loving God. We probably hear about the Good Samaritan more often because we live in a society that at some level recognizes the importance of helping our neighbor even if we mostly fail to do it. In modern San Francisco there are plenty of people who would encourage us to be merciful or kind to our neighbor, but far fewer who see why worship, gratitude or praise for God matter.

Many don't believe in God. They might say that God does not need our prayers. So why do we worship? Why should we return and praise God? For many years psychologists mostly studied various forms of illness. About twenty years ago psychologists like Dacher Keltner in Berkeley began studying happiness more closely.² One of their primary conclusions is that happiness and gratitude are intimately connected. In some senses we were created to give thanks. It is our nature to glorify God if you will.

My friend Matt Boulton explains it this way.³ Imagine a child receiving a meal as a gift prepared by her parents. She might consume it simply as fuel, or take it for granted as a privilege. It might be a matter chiefly of sensual pleasure for her. It might be all of this at once. But if that is it, she has missed something essential. She has not received the gift. She does not understand what really happened.

It is only when she recognizes the meal as a gift and thanks her parents for it, that it becomes what it really is – a blessing for her. Her thanks is part of receiving the gift and understanding their love. It completes the gift, it makes the gift what it really is. Matt says that, "gratitude is the natural echo of grace."

And that is why we worship. We have received our existence as a gift and it becomes more complete in our recognition of this truth, in returning and praising God. The theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) writes that keeping the Sabbath day, honoring God in church has two benefits.⁴

First, it allows us to be free **from** our selves, to rejoice and be in God. If you work a hundred hours a week at Facebook Mark Zuckerberg in effect becomes your god. If you work for yourself you make yourself a kind of god. The Sabbath reminds us that we cannot trust in our own powers but only in the God who is for us. Church helps us know ourselves not in what we do, but through our faith in God.

Second, keeping a holy day, participating in church makes us free **for** God. It gives us a chance to hear God's Word and understand what it means for us. Martin Luther writes that the Word of God is a sanctuary above all sanctuaries. Through it Jesus shows us that we are God's beloved children.

Barth points out that some people say that they find God on the golf course, in nature, a museum, reading a good book or attending the symphony. But all of these are forms of escape. When you come to church you are not merely a passive listener. You become part of this community that God has gathered. Look around you. You didn't choose these people. God did. Coming here you make yourself open not just to God but to unpredictable contact with others. This experience of worship will change who you are all week long.

Yesterday we had the funeral for Dr. Ron Johnson who has exemplified this ideal of joy and worship and community more than almost anyone. He was the gate of love through which many of us arrived here and the gate of compassion for countless people who died of AIDS. A few weeks ago I saw him. He radiated joy from his deathbed. He said he felt ready to be with God. Deeper than word in his smile I dropped into a mystical understanding of how much Dr. J loves us.

Why do we go to church? We know the answer to this question. At some level we understand the lesson of both the Good Samaritan and the Thankful Samaritan. We come here because living is more than breathing and eating and being respected by others. We come here because we depend on God's love, because we long to experience the joy of being fully alive. We were made for gratitude. The gift of our life becomes more complete when we rejoice and thank our creator for it. So let us turn and praise God.

¹ A great deal of this sermon comes from Matt Boulton, "Thanking is Believing: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for the Eighteenth Week After Pentecost," SALT, 8 October 2019. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/10/8/thanking-is-believing-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-eighteenth-week-after-pentecost>

² Dacher Keltner, *Born to Be Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life* (NY: Norton, 2009).

³ Matt Boulton, "Thanking is Believing: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for the Eighteenth Week After Pentecost," SALT, 8 October 2019.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4: The Doctrine of Creation* tr. A.T. Mckay, T.H.L. Parker, H Knight, H.A. Kennedy, J. Marks (NY: T & T Clark, 1961) 47-72.