

Hallelujah!

Psalm 150, Ephesians 1:3-14

First Presbyterian Church

September 27, 2020

Spiritual Practices Series – Worship

Psalm 150

¹Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!

²Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

³Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!

⁴Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!

⁵Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

⁶Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!

Ephesians 1:3-14

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴just as he chose us in Christ* before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance,* having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this* is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Prayer for Illumination

Living God,
help us so to hear your holy Word
that we may truly understand;
that, understanding, we may believe,
and, believing,
we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience,
seeking your honor and glory in all that we do;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon

For the past several years, the very last thing we do in worship on Easter Sunday is invite anyone who wants to join the choir in singing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." Though I don't sight-read music and drift from part to part, it always sends chills down my spine as the organ and the brass and so many voices fill this sanctuary with Handel's triumphant celebration of Christ's victory. And though I love the entire piece, my favorite part is that moment at the very end, when the choir pauses for just a moment and the sanctuary is filled with a holy silence... then one more time with full organ and voice, the choir sings one final "Hal-le-lu-jah!!!!"

Well, that's what we have in Psalm 150 – the psalm Heather and I opened worship with – the final Hallelujah.¹ There are many other psalms of praise in this most ancient hymnbook of our faith, but none surpasses this last one in its call to praise simply for the sake of praise... worship simply for the sake of worship. Most of the other psalms list the reasons WHY praise is called for. But, "here the emphasis is upon the call to praise itself, and upon the universality of that praise in all the earth, by every creature, and by means of every instrument that can make music."² Praise simply for the sake of praise.

Which is hard for us purposeful, utilitarian-minded Presbyterians. We want a reason for everything we do... we need some way to justify our time and effort. And frankly, that's why we talk about "getting something out of worship... or getting our batteries re-charged... or our tanks re-filled." It's why we think something in worship ought to heal us or at least make us feel better. It's why we look to worship for self-improvement (for learning something interesting or gaining some new insight). And don't get me wrong, I get it! I'm the same way. And there is absolutely nothing wrong or bad about these desires to be healed and uplifted by worship... to learn something and feel more hopeful... to GET something from worship – these desires are not wrong! They're just too small to comprehend the fullness of the worship of Almighty God.³ And the reason they're too small is that they face in the wrong direction... since each is oriented toward the worshiper rather than the One being worshiped. The spiritual vector of these desires is pointed at us, when it ought to be in exactly the opposite direction – toward God.

Many years ago, the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, told us this. Using the metaphor of the theater, he observed that during worship most congregations thought of themselves as the audience... with the ministers as the performers on stage... and God as the prompter from behind the scenes. But according to Kierkegaard, we need to flip this on its head so that the members of the congregation are the actors... and the ministers are the prompters... and most important, GOD is the audience. So that the opportunity we all have when we worship... the opportunity we have each time we give ourselves to God... is the opportunity to turn away from ourselves and re-center on God.⁴

¹ Stan Mast

² The Harper Collins Study Bible.

³ Michael L. Lindvall, A Geography of God-Exploring the Christian Journey, (WJK,2007), p.63

⁴ Lindvall, p. 65

My friends, this is the heart of the matter for the spiritual practice of worship. Worship doesn't really have a purpose... at least not in the "utilitarian" sense of that word. It is, as Marva Dawn has said, "a royal waste of time" ... a glorious and transforming waste of time in which we turn away from ourselves and turn toward God. However, though worship may be a waste of time... something very essential HAPPENS when we worship – the order of creation is set aright – God is recognized as the Creator of all... and those of us who are creatures come to truly own our "creaturehood." In worship we speak our confession honestly... we have sinned in thought, word, and deed... and we discover the liberation that comes with being forgiven and accepted by God and one another. In worship, we no longer imagine we are the master of our universe... that we have to be in control of everything... but surrender any pretense to be God by turning in adoration to the One who is God. In worship, life edges into proper balance and we are free to be who we really are – no more, but no less, than who we really are. Worship is the regular practice of not being God... whether we offer it as individuals or in our family groups or gathered on a Sunday morning, it is the regular practice of not being God.

And, I use the word "practice" very intentionally – not only because this is a sermon series on spiritual practices, but because true worship IS something, we human beings have to work at. Our strong tendency as human beings is to live as if we are the very center of the universe... as if the world revolves around us... as if we are God. And without the practice of worship, our sense of self-importance will know no bounds.

I think most of you will remember a time when only doctors had pagers (remember pagers?) ... and the only person who carried a telephone around with him was the President of the United States, in case of nuclear attack. Now, we are all important, every one of us. We carry super computers in our hip pockets... We're all reachable 24/7... news and advertising and entertainment is packaged with our individual preferences in mind. And because of this it's very hard not to think, "Hmmm, I'm pretty important... indispensable even." To worship God on a regular basis... to PRACTICE the worship of God of a regular basis is to hold on to the essential truth that God and God alone is indispensable... that God is bigger and more important than we are... that the world does not depend on us – the world and all the creatures in it depend on God. Richard Niebuhr put this so well: "To praise God is to acknowledge that we neither make nor keep ourselves."⁵

And finally, this – when you get down to it, worship is what we are made for... it is the reason for our existence... it is as the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "our chief end." To glorify God and enjoy him forever. I read this week something an adult choir member in another church wrote about what coming to church and making music in their sanctuary meant to her: "When I was a young girl," she wrote, "I used to look up... a lot. I would lie on the grass and watch the clouds... at night I would watch the stars. These days, it seems, I am looking more and more straight ahead at the line of traffic, at the computer screen, or at the television. Sadly, sometimes, I find myself looking down on other people with whom I disagree or who do not share my values. But on Sunday, at church, I look up. We in the pews look up at the pulpit and the chancel and the baptismal font and communion table... and most importantly, at the cross."

⁵ Rev. Joanna Adams in her sermon "The Necessity of Song," Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA., May 14, 1999

We look up and once again get straight about whom we belong to in life and in death... and who is worthy of our praise.⁶ Returning once more to the image of the theater, John Calvin said, “the world is the theater of God’s glory.” The world is where God’s glory is manifested... AND it is what gives God glory. And we who are actors in this theater of God’s glory, we have one major part... one major line... even though it is spoken in a million different ways. That line echoes across time and space, down the ages and throughout the far reaches of the universe. It is simply this: “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!”⁷

⁶ Adams again.

⁷ Mast referring to the commentary of Brent A. Strawn.