

“With What Shall I Come Before the Lord?”

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In the theater, the play is staged before an audience who are called theatergoers; but at the devotional address, God [God's]self is present. In the most earnest sense, God is the critical theatergoer, who looks on to see how the lines are spoken and how they are listened to: hence here the customary audience is wanting. The speaker is then the prompter, and the listener stands openly before God. The listener... is the actor, who in all truth acts before God. —Soren Kierkegaard, Purity of Heart

Readings: Micah 6:6-8
Luke 14:7-14

Today I want to talk about how, as a congregation, we open ourselves to the sacred presence of God. Every major religious tradition, including our own Jewish/Christian tradition, recognized that the pursuit of things spiritual happens best when we are in a community that intentionally focuses upon the art of spiritual living. The community provides the context, the soil with which we grow and live out God's requirements. The prophet asks the question, “What does God require of us?” and then answers, “to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God.”

And so as a community we have an awesome responsibility first to speak a prophetic word and to be a transforming presence in the larger church and society. We seek not only to ease the suffering of others but to alleviate the causes of that suffering in society as well.

Second, as a community we practice how to love kindness together. We provide an inclusive and accepting environment for all people to explore and grow in faith. Since each person travels an inward journey of faith, we support and nurture each other along the way. As we reach the dizzying peaks and the deep, dark valleys, we surround one another with kindness and grace.

Finally, as a community we practice how to laugh at even our best efforts and how to avoid taking ourselves too seriously. Together we seek a faith that is not closed off but open to continual growth. We expect God to speak new things to us, sometimes shocking and challenging things. This is what we mean when we proclaim a progressive and liberating Christian faith. We are part of a tradition that is “always reforming,” and we expect God to speak new things to us, but not just us, to other people, to different traditions and to each new generation to come, as well.

Theologians Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr referred to this as the “protestant principle,” which is the protest of any human claim to an absolute truth. There is a built-in self-critical aspect. But sadly, even the most progressive tradition is susceptible to becoming hardened and calcified and lose its green edge of growth. And we must add that even the most progressive individuals and congregations can lose their humility and sense of mystery.

In this morning’s passage from Luke, we have a scene of Jesus eating with the Pharisees. Now, it must be said that Jesus did not share much in common with the established religious culture of his day, even through he was a Rabbi. Socially, theologically and economically, Jesus and his possession-less followers were outsiders.

And what does Jesus say? He gives them a lesson on humility. Often we have seen how Jesus reverses roles in his stories and short, pithy sayings. But here, Jesus is affirming ideas that are rather common in Hebrew wisdom. The idea that God humbles the proud and exalts the humble would have been a familiar theme to the Pharisees. When Jesus reminds them to take the seat of least honor, the lowest place at the wedding celebration, he is helping them remember something that they had once learned but forgotten. One gets the feeling that this is something that must be continually relearned and practiced. “Go invite the lowly, the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind to your next dinner party,” was a reminder to the religious practitioners that they still had a long way to go. “Those who promote themselves will be demoted, and those who demote themselves will be promoted.” Jesus is affirming the importance within his own tradition of demoting oneself, of practicing humility.

No to an extent, we might identify with those outcasts whom Jesus told the Pharisees to include. But I have to say, as primarily white, middle-class, First World mainline Christians, I suggest that we also still have much in common with that audience of Jesus. And the good news of this story is despite their self-serving tendencies, Jesus did not give up on them. In fact, there he is, eating with them, breaking bread with them. And we can be assured that the God we see in Jesus does not give up on us, either.

When that wonderful writer, Anne Dillard, was in the ninth grade, like most people her age she was suspicious of the values and traditions of her parents. Her parents had been taking her to church ever since she could remember. Annie wasn’t too sure she really wanted to be in church, but she went to church nonetheless because it was important to her parents. On a typical Sunday morning she was sitting in her usual place, the first row of the balcony in a large stone cared church in Pittsburg. She enjoyed the balcony because she could watch the people below, the women in their fancy dresses, and the men in their stiff shirts and neck ties. In her opinion the people had gathered to remind God how hard they had worked and how few pleasures they took for themselves during the week.

Now, Annie was at that age when she was quite sure of herself. She thought she knew better than anyone. And on that particular Sunday she realized it was Communion Sunday. Annie always did her best to avoid communion. To be honest the whole thing seemed absurd to her. It had no real meaning. Annie wondered what Christ must have thought of the whole charade. She watched as the silver trays were passed out, with the cubes of bread and the Welch's grape juice. Then as she was looking around a strange feeling came over her. She saw her friends praying, even the boys she had seen at the dance the night before. They were praying. It seemed almost unbelievable that they could take communion so seriously. They she watched as the adults prayed. Every head was bowed in the sanctuary; no one was moving. As she watched she was alerted to a new feeling, something she had never experienced before. "I didn't know what to make of this," she thought to herself. As the ushers made their way to the Table, Annie Dillard realized that she knew most of the people present and, more importantly, she knew what they loved and she wasn't so sure it was God. But there they were.

It was there in that old church that she experienced the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. The people that she doubted came together as flawed in need of bread and juice. And that morning Annie realized why we celebrate communion. It's not because we deserve it. It's not because we have been so good. Rather we come to the Table in need of something we cannot do for ourselves. We offer ourselves to be part of the body of Christ, so that we can go out into the world that seems forsaken. And Annie realized that this is not a forsaken world because God is present through God's people. (And we are all God's people.)

And one of the things that I want you to see this morning is that the experience of communion and humility are very closely related. **Worship is when we practice humility.**

As Annie Dillard knew at a young age, worship is often viewed as something at which one is seen, to keep up appearances. But sometimes even in spite of this, worship has the ability to transform us, to strengthen us and to change us. In the Letter to the Hebrews it says, "let us draw near with a true heart... let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, *not neglecting to meet together*, as is the habit of some, but *encouraging one another*." When people have "true hearts," they meet together, inspire each other to love and good works and encourage each other.

But notice that the focus is not upon oneself; it is upon the other. It is a communal focus, not an individual one. One asks not, "What is in it for me?" One asks "What is in it for the group? What is in it for others?" When worship becomes something that we use to get something—even if what we want to get is very good—then we have lost the proper focus of worship. **True worship happens when we practice giving up our "self."**

Someone once asked preacher, author and activist, Will Campbell, what he “got out of worship.” 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 am talking about is the paradox of worship: **it is by going in with an attitude of giving that we receive.** If we go in with the attitude of getting, we receive little. If we make worship a means to an end, that is, a way to be inspired or made more faithful, then we will lose out and gain little benefits. It is in the losing that we find. It is by going in with the sole purpose of loving God and the person sitting next to you that our faith will be strengthened.

Because, you see, the danger has always been that we think that we know what we need. We think we know what should please us. But the truth has always been that we don’t always know what we need. The danger has always been that we want to play God; we want to know what’s best; we want to eat of that tree of knowledge. But sometimes, one must simply let God be God, and that is all one can do. Worship is one of those times.

Soren Kierkegaard, a 19th century Danish philosopher, had some interesting and helpful things to say about worship. He said that the tendency is for us, the congregation, to think of the preacher, the choir and the musicians up here as the actors or entertainers on a “stage” and to think of the rest of you out in the pews as the “audience.” Kierkegaard stated that this is a misconception and that a church worship service is *not* a theater performance. Rather, he said that in worship the whole congregation—all of us—are on stage. The preacher and musicians are more like the prompters behind the scenes, giving the people in the pews, the actors, their lines. And so in worship, **God is the audience.** Nobody is a passive observer, but everyone in the room is active in worship—actively listening, actively praying, actively praying, actively open to God.

As Paul said, everyone in the community is present their self as a “living sacrifice unto God.” (Romans 12:1) Everyone contributes; everyone gives themselves. The preacher isn’t the only one giving a sermon. Their entire congregation is making proclamation and bearing witness.

Unfortunately, the architecture of most church building does more to encourage this “theater mentality” than to dispel it. If we must think of this area up here as a “stage,” then just once I’d like to have all of you out there pack ourselves up here, imagine that God is sitting in the “audience,” and do our worship from here. For God is always the object in worship. The object is not our feelings, whether I feel good or inspired or happy or entertained or satisfied.

You know, our culture has never been so entertainment conscious as it is today. And this is killing worship. More and more, people are going to worship as they would to a movie—to feel good, to be moved, to be entertained. And many

churches play into this in order to be “successful.” But what kind of success is that?

This is but an extension of that great paradox of which Jesus spoke: “If one seeks to save one’s life, one will lose it. If one seeks to lose one’s life for the sake of the gospel, one will find it.” One might just as easily say, “If one seeks spiritual inspiration and strength, one will not find it. If one seeks simply to worship God and strengthen other, one will find the spiritual life of faith.”

In the Letter to the Philippians it says that Jesus “humbled himself.” And it was because he humbled himself that he was “highly exalted.” It also says that Jesus “emptied himself.” The Greek word here is “kenosis.” It means to “look beyond oneself,” “to let go of oneself.” Jesus practiced this. “Not my will but Thy will,” he prayed. What a great way to summarize worship! It says that he “took the form of a servant.” This is an important message for those who wish to follow the way of Jesus.

And so in worship we can come together seeking to be served, or we can come with the life of Christ radiating to each other, seeking to serve, with a self-less attitude, focused upon God and others. And when this happens, you can really feel something in the room. Call it Holy Spirit.

What’s the main reason for going to worship? Not for yourself. It is because of others. Because if you are not there others will miss you and the whole gathering 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 giving that we receive. It is in the emptying of ourselves that we become full. It is by practicing humility, by demoting ourselves that we are promoted and exalted.

We started this morning with a question raised by the prophet, “With what shall we come before the Lord?” Well, we come not to be entertained or to watch other people work. No, we come before God ready to work, to be active, to roll up our sleeves, to practice humility and openness and receptivity to God’s spirit.

In the Zen tradition of Buddhism there is a story of a smart and eager university professor who comes to the old Zen master for teachings. The Zen master first offers him some tea. The professor accepts the tea, and the master begins

pouring it in the cup. But the cup fills up and he keeps on pouring as it overflows to the ground. The professor says, "Stop! What are you doing?"

"A mind that is already full cannot take in anything new," the master explains. "Like this cup, you are full of opinions and preconceptions. In order to find happiness and truth, you must first empty your cup."

With what shall we come before God? With humility. With openness. Let us encourage one another to come as Jesus, not to be served but to serve. For it is by giving up our "selves," our needs, our wants our expectations—that we will receive and be made full. May we stand as an empty vessel, and empty cup, before the Holy Mystery that is God.