

Palm/Passion Sunday  
March 25, 2018  
Mark 15:1-47

Lyle McKee  
St. Thomas Lutheran Church  
Bloomington, Indiana

### **Corporate Practice: Worship**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The spiritual practice under consideration today is worship. For anyone who may not know, this is the eleventh in a series of sermons spanning the Sundays and Wednesdays in Lent on various spiritual practices that have stood the test of time.

Let me begin this treatment of worship with a quote from William Temple:

'To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.

To worship, I believe, is to step out of what seems to be reality and to experience the truly real. It is to touch life. It is to know, to feel, to experience the resurrected Christ in the midst of the gathered community—yes, even during Lent. It is a foretaste of the kingdom of God. It is living in a reality that reflects God's desires for humanity and the world. We share in prayer and praise. We have an equal place in the circle of shared communion. We are embraced by the love of God reflected in the faces of those who worship alongside us in both the Church Militant—the living, and the Church Triumphant—those who have died in the Lord.

Worship is the human response to the divine initiative of drawing us to Godself. Even in the Garden of Eden, God walked, seeking out Adam and Eve. In the passion and crucifixion that we reflect upon this week, Jesus was seeking to draw us to himself. We heard that in the gospel from last Sunday: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). Worship is an offering of prayer and praise out of a deep need to respond in gratitude to God for God's manifold blessings. It is kindled within us when the Spirit of God touches our human spirit.

It is well to recall that our Lord says this when asked about the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is...love your neighbor as yourself." (Mark 12:30). Worship first; service second. Indeed, service flows out of worship.

Here's a powerful metaphor. The epistles speak often of the believing community as the "body of Christ." As human life is unthinkable without its many members, so it is unthinkable for Christians to live in isolation from one another. Martin Luther witnesses to the fact that "at home, in my own house, there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the

church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through.”

There is also sometimes a sense of being gathered into one mind, becoming of one accord (Phil. 3:15). Thomas Kelly writes: “A quickening Presence pervades us, breaking down some part of the special privacy and isolation of our individual lives and blending our spirits within a superindividual Life and Power. An objective, dynamic Presence enfolds us all, nourishes our souls, speaks glad, unutterable comfort with us, and quickens us in depths that had before been slumbering.” When we gathered in worship, things occur that could never happen when we are alone. We become what scripture calls “koinonia,” a deep fellowship of believers grasped by the power of the Holy Spirit.

At its best, Kelly describes this as becoming “wrapped in a sense of unity and of Presence such as quiets all words and enfolds us within an unspeakable calm and interknittedness within a vaster life.” It is among the reasons why I consider worship through media tasteless, next to useless, and utterly flat. It emphasizes our separateness, not our connectedness in the intimate sharing of the body of Christ.

There are various ways to help ourselves enter into worship. One that is dear to my heart is to still the mind and heart—to let go of the tasks and troubles that are frequently on my mind and sink into the gentle cradling arms of our Lord. It is about ceasing and stilling our human initiated activities and entering into the holy, divine presence. In many ways this is like prayer and meditation, practices we have spoken about as practicing the presence of God. The intent is to let the presence and power of God permeate the daily fabric of our lives. The hope is that we live in a perpetual, inward, listening silence—a state of worship—so that God is the source of our words and actions.

Francois Fenelon writes, “Happy the soul which by a sincere self-renunciation, holds itself ceaselessly in the hands of its Creator, ready to do everything which (God) wishes; which never stops saying to itself a hundred times a day, ‘Lord, what wouldst thou that I should do?’”

Praise, of course, is integral to worship. Prayer and praise are two words often used to summarize why we worship and what worship is all about. The Psalms, represented each week in our liturgies, are among the most prominent of praise literature in scripture. “Praise the Lord!” is the shout that reverberates from one end of the Psalter to the other. Singing, shouting, dancing, rejoicing, adoring—all are the language of praise. It’s part of why I enjoy the interruptions of children in worship. Their cries and shouts and vitality reveal the exuberance of their souls.

Scripture urges us to “offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to God’s name” (Heb. 13:15). Jesus rejected the sacrifices

of the temple in favor of the sacrifice of praise. Peter tells us that as Christ new royal priesthood, we are to offer “spiritual sacrifices,” declaring “the wonderful deeds of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:5,9).

Singing is a powerful mode of offering our sacrifice of praise. Singing reaches more deeply into the human soul than does speech. It moves us beyond thought and into the heart of devotion, emotion, and praise. No fewer than 40 psalms command us to “sing unto the Lord.” Singing can focus us, center us, and in hymn singing we do so as one body, in the unity of the Spirit. We join our voices in a unified offering of praise.

One of the questions I often get from confirmation students—and adults—is why do we stand and sit so often in worship. One answer has simply to do with the honor we show what is happening at worship when we stand. But it is more than that. Worship is intended to involve our whole bodies. We sing, we stand, we sit, we move about offering a word of peace, we move from our chairs to our places around the table of our Lord, we feast upon the bread of life and the wine of salvation, nourishing our bodies and our spirits, becoming the active and vital Body of Christ, and we are sent forth with a declaration to love and serve our Lord. Worship is physical as much as it is spiritual. It involves all of who we are and moves towards our transformation into full children of God.

Here are a few suggestions about how to become more worshipful:

First, learn to practice the presence of God daily. Really try to follow Paul’s words, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Tess. 5:17). Punctuate every moment with inward whisperings of adoration, praise, and thanksgiving.

Second, worship in differing ways. Worship when you’re alone. Worship with those who join you for bible study or a sewing group or a meal. Worship in the beauty of holiness when you are in your most sacred place.

Third, find ways to prepare for the gathered experience of worship. Go to bed earlier on Saturday night. Take time for prayer, self-examination, and prayer before you go to sleep. Read over the scripture passages to be used on Sunday—did you know that we list next week’s reading in the weekly every Sunday? Or simply arrive early and do so.

Fourth, nurture a willingness to be gathered in the power of the Lord. Let go of your agendas, concerns, and troubles. The language of worship is not “I,” but “we.” Submit to the liturgy and to the ways of God. Let them wash over you. Let them be blessings.

Fifth, absorb distractions with gratitude. If something distracts you, whether a noise or an unruly child, learn to take it in and appreciate it, rather than fuming about it

and letting it turn you away from the peace of God. If children are running about, bless them. Thank God for the energy they bring to worship. One pastor notes that he loves to have babies and small children in worship because sometimes they're the only ones that he can be sure are alive! Learn simply to receive whatever happens in the gathered assembly, rather than feeling that certain things deter your worship. Relax. Go with it. Enjoy the experience of being fully present with all those who come to offer prayer and praise.

We need one another to worship well. The community is strengthened when we gather. One log by itself cannot burn for very long, but when many logs are put together, even if they are poor and green, they can make quite a fire. Remember the counsel of Proverbs "Iron sharpen iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another" (27:17). Even dull lives may be honed and refined through our mutual efforts at offering our gratitude to God.

I pray that we will continue to open ourselves to the adventurous life of the Spirit in worship. And I close with Paul's words in Colossians:

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom,, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (3:16). Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.

[Based on Richard J. Foster's "Celebration of Discipline"]