

“When In Our Music God is Glorified”

Isaiah 58:1-9a

October 24, 2021

Whom do we worship?

At the outset of his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul rattles off an exhaustive inventory of humanity’s moral failings. It’s really an impressive list—envy, murder, strife, deceit, perversion, gossip, slander, malice, arrogance. The apostle covers all bases. And what is the cause of all this human depravity? Is it our rebellious nature? Is it human refusal to follow God’s law? Is it the temptation of sin afforded by affluence and comfort? All of these feel to me like plausible answers, but Paul’s answer is even more fundamental. Idolatry. My mentor Will Willimon translates Paul’s words this way: “They sang doxologies to creatures that ought only to be sung to God.” It’s really a stunning perspective on the intersection between theology and ethics. Immoral action springs from misplaced praise. The One whom we choose to worship impacts the way we live.

The prophet Isaiah makes the same connection in this morning’s reading. Here’s the context for the text: The people of God have finally come home from exile, returning to Jerusalem and gradually reestablishing the rhythms of their prior lives, including the practice of worship. And for a time, they honor the God who brought them out of Babylon. They are clear about the source of their freedom. They live out of that clarity with deep conviction for a time. But by the time the prophet speaks these words, those rituals have become spectacles, dramatic exhibitions of outward piety, ostentatiously fasting in public so that everyone can see them while ignoring their hungry neighbors just down the street. It is ceremony without substance, religious rites that do not produce righteous living. And Isaiah minces no words. He is brutally honest.

Such performances are not worship at all, at least not worship of God. You bow at the altar of impotent idols, self-absorbed and spiritually bankrupt, and God is not pleased.

The truth conveyed by both apostle and prophet is this: our practice of praise fashions our faith. Put another way, be careful where you offer ultimate devotion, for you will come more and more to resemble the one you worship.

How do we worship?

In many ways, of course. Words and silence. Postures of prayer and movements of praise. Isaiah says we also worship with acts of compassion, justice, and mercy. Isaiah says we are worshiping God when we feed the hungry and house the homeless. We are worshiping God when we welcome the stranger and advocate for the outcast. And, we worship God with our voices joined in song. Saint Augustine said that anyone who sings “prays twice,” praising God with both words and music. From the daily symphony of songbirds to the harmony of hymnody in corporate worship, music has always had a way of turning human hearts toward God, of lifting our vision along with our voices to the presence of God. Who among us cannot recall a moment (or likely many moments) when a melody moved us into the presence of the sacred, or awakened us to God’s power in a new way?

My favorite writer is Marilynne Robinson. She has a wonderful essay in which she marvels at how old American hymns have come to move her so deeply she has difficulty even speaking about them. Robinson writes, “There is a great old American hymn that sounds like astonishment itself, and I mention it here because even its title speaks

more powerfully of the meaning of our narrative than whole shelves of books. The hymn is called ‘Wondrous Love.’ ‘What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss/to bear the dreadful cross for my soul?’... [The hymn captures the] main point of our narrative,” Robinson writes, “which is that God is of a kind to love the world extravagantly, wondrously, and the world is of a kind to be worth, which is not to say worthy of, this pained and rapturous love. This is the essence of the story that forever eludes telling. It lives in the world not as myth or history but as a saturating light, a light so brilliant that it hides its source, to borrow an image from another good old hymn.”

Music opens our hearts to the Holy in a way nothing else can. When words fail us, music fills the gap. When our minds can no longer comprehend, music remains embedded in our souls, telling of a beauty beyond sight, a sadness beyond tears, a wisdom beyond knowledge, a God beyond our praising. In song we find that new dimension, that deeper connection to God and one another. Our praise, when it is praise of God, provokes us. When God is glorified in our music, we are compelled to praise God with our lives. Just living springs from proper praise.

Why do we worship?

Perhaps the simplest answer is that worship is why we’re here. It is the fullest expression of our humanity. Now, I recognize that might be a tough sell these days because worship seems to lack a certain necessary practicality. You might say that worship doesn’t *do* anything. After all, nothing is produced in this hour we spend together, at least nothing that you can capture and commodify. And *this*, I believe, is precisely why we desperately need worship now. We need some time each week that isn’t about us. We need to get out of the way. We need to sing and pray and listen and turn our attention to God.

I’m reminded of the experience of a friend of mine who is a pastor in Charlotte. She described to me that following a worship service, someone found

her and shared that he did not like worship that particular day.

“You didn’t like it?” she repeated.

“Yes, that’s right. I didn’t like it.”

My friend smiled. “Well, that’s okay. We weren’t worshipping you.”

Here in the Church, we are bold enough to tell you that *this* is what you need, whether you like it or not. We are honest enough to tell you that the world doesn’t revolve around you. And what’s more, living as if it does only ensures that you will never be fulfilled. Your life will be endlessly poured out in the exhausting pursuit of false gods. God wants more for you than that.

This week, our pastoral team met, and discussion turned to the post-pandemic church. We wondered when we might see you next, how often you will be here, whether the shifts of the last eighteen months are temporary interruptions or irreversible alterations. The truth is none of us know. But we do know this: Something essential is lost when you and I neglect the rituals that shape and mold us. After all, the God we worship is the One whom we will come to resemble. That is why we worship.

And make no mistake about this. We humans *will* worship. We may not speak of it that way, but our idols demand absolute allegiance and so many sacrifices. We offer them our devotion and our praise. We ascribe to them all the attributes of divinity. Our gods are legion, and we line up to worship them. Influencers and ideologies. Markets and upward mobility. Pundits and politicians. Possessions and power. Self-actualization, self-help, self-care, self-serving, selfish self-devotion, self-obsession. Self, self, self. We hear the constant cacophony urging us to bow down in empty praise of worthless idols that draw our attention away from the needs of others and disconnect us from the source and purpose of our lives.

We will worship. And we will come more and more to resemble the god we worship.

Then we come here, and we hear something different. We hear that our God-given purpose, the reason we are here at all, is to be drawn more deeply into relationship with God and to be sent from service [here] to service [there], to be gathered so that we might be scattered as light in the world, to lift our voice in worship of God, and to worship God by feeding our hungry neighbors, listening to the stories of those silenced, giving as an act of gratitude, trusting the goodness of God more than our own troubled minds.

We come to worship bringing everything that weighs us down and all that holds us back. And here we find something more than what we can create on our own. We find faith forged in the crucibles of crisis. We find courage and compassion that respond to the needs of a neighbor with selfless love. We hear these hymns sung by that great cloud of witnesses without number. We discover our purpose in praise.

The vision of John in the Book of Revelation suggests that the Kingdom of God will be above all a place of worship. John envisions all the saints, all God's creatures in sky and earth and sea, endlessly singing praise to God.

Mark Twain said that if heaven is one endless choir rehearsal he didn't think he'd bother to try for it. That line may be good for a chuckle, but he was missing the point entirely. Such singing is our heart's deepest longing. We were created to praise God. From the very first beats of our human heart to the final hymns that will one day carry us to eternity, we are here to make music with the lives God has offered us. That is, we are here to give ourselves away in worship and in work that honors God and fulfills our deepest longing. We will be restless until we find our rest in God.

Yes, one day, our restless hearts will find their one true home, offering the beauty of our lives to the One who first offered beauty and life to us. One day.

In the meantime, in our lives and in our church, in our music and in our ministry, may God be glorified. May *God* be glorified. Amen.