

The Third Mark of Discipleship: Worshipping the Living God

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Psalm 29

*1 Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.*

*2 Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
worship the Lord in holy splendour.*

*3 The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, over mighty waters.*

*4 The voice of the Lord is powerful;
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.*

*5 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.*

*6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.*

7 The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.

*8 The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.*

*9 The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'*

*10 The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever.*

*11 May the Lord give strength to his people!
May the Lord bless his people with peace!*

Luke 17: 5-10

5 The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!' 6The Lord replied, 'If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea", and it would obey you. 7 'Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from ploughing or tending sheep in the field, "Come here at once and take your place at the table"? 8Would you not rather say to him, "Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink"? 9Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, "We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!" '

We continue today on our spiritual journey as we explore the six marks of being a disciple of Jesus. We have said that the first two marks of being a disciple are first, to extend a warm and hospitable welcome to others and, second to serve and do justice. As shocking as this may sound, extending a bold welcome to others, serving and doing justice is not really unique to Christians. Sometimes I find that those who do not see themselves as Christian have much to teach me about welcome, justice, and service. They sometimes do a better job than Christians themselves.

Part of our job as disciples is to set aside our propensity to be a little smug and instead be open to the insights and experiences of others. As disciples, we just need to get out of ourselves and go out into the world and join the human race where we serve, welcome and do justice. But as disciples, we also live with the realization that the quality of our service, our welcome and our justice is not all up to us. Many people suffer from what I call compassion fatigue. We have this way of carrying all the world's problems on our shoulders and get this idea that it is all up to us. It just won't happen unless we have our fingers in it. We become control freaks.

For disciples, we must remember that we are agents for good in the world. But we also must remember that God is a bigger and more expansive force for good than we can muster. And we must remember that it is not us alone that brings about a heaven and a new earth. Bringing about a new creation is something which God does. God is a more powerful being than our mortal selves. As humans, we are by definition limited. And yet we are enlivened and carried by a divine force and power who is so much greater than the strength that we can muster. It is really hard to be a disciple unless we embrace the third mark of discipleship. The third mark of discipleship is learning to worship the living God. The psalmist put it well when he invites us to "ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; And to worship the Lord in holy splendor." When we worship the living God, we give our hearts and minds over to a divine being who invites us to take a broader perspective on our lives. When we worship, we strive to see the world as God might see it. When we worship we stretch our hearts and minds to discover beauty when others can't see it or if we are too scared to embrace it. And when we are worshipping the living God we are not Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives, worshipping some dead God which becomes a political play thing co-opted by one group at the expense of the other.

No God is a dynamic, living, and irascible. God challenges, convicts and pulls us out of our complacency. God most certainly refuses to be boxed in by our by our pet ideologies. Hence, when we listen to the biblical stories and are challenged to reflect on them through the preached word, this is not a marketing event where the preacher is trying to win us over and sell us something. In this world, we are besieged by marketing and spin all the time.

Instead, in preaching, Adrienne and I are here to comfort and challenge you in such a way that you might encounter God in a multitude of ways. We don't expect you to always agree with us. We come here instead to provoke you enough to wake from your slumber and think about your own faith and how it is that you will try to put your faith into practice in the world. God, through the preached word, comforts and disturbs us all at the same time.

When we worship the living God, we also participate in a tradition and a wisdom handed down through the centuries, which is both constant and changing and very much dynamic and alive. I know in our time that tradition can get a very bad rap--and not with out very good reason. Tradition so often gets used in churches as a sort of liturgical weapon to repress, constrict, exclude and make our spirits dry. Tradition becomes a monument to what someone thought was a good idea in the 1950s and then we speak of it as though Jesus himself created it. We sing hymns with no passion and come to sound like pietistic frogs singing to the tunes of an organ which is played poorly and drones on and on. This is, fortunately, not a problem here, with David as our organist!

But in another sense, we need a tradition because we are so burdened by the tyranny of relevance and what's happening now. We need to be caught up in something bigger than ourselves and handed down through the centuries. Sometimes you just need to sing Holy, Holy, Holy played in beautiful in 4/4 time meter.

I was reading an article a few weeks ago where a 27 year old woman was calling on more traditional church not to be too hasty in abandoning their reverence for tradition. She confided that she spent a couple of years in college going to one of those new "happening" churches which worshipped in a gym. The whole service was stripped of ritual, had a rock band, and a pastor who wore a Hawaiian shirt while he preached. It had quite a few virtues, but at times it became tiresome. One day there was a baptism, where the pastor dressed as a hipster, held the child of the day, and readjusted the baptismal formula to say "Dude, I baptize you in the name of the father, son, and holy spirit." "Dude"? Really? I heard a couple of guys last night at the Rite Aid picking up beer and calling each other "dude".

In the tradition of the church, we usually name children and we don't call them "dude." It is worth noting that recent research on developments in worship suggests that younger people seek something in church, which is very different than the MTV charged world they live in the other six days of the week. Now, personally I really like rock and music of all kinds and much of it is not commonly found in church. And I think when it is done well, that music belongs here and not just out there. But the

old stuff made new is also a very good thing. Liturgy, tradition and ritual conveys a wisdom that so often eludes us in the culture.

We can derive great comfort and inspiration when the church invites us to get caught up in history, knowing that long before us, there were communities who struggled with most of the same things we struggle with today. Embracing a living history, a living tradition, grounds us, humbles us, but also helps us to feel strong and full of hope.

Finally, as disciples, worshipping the living God is something we do with other people. I do not doubt that there is great value in attending to God out in nature as the sun sets or rises and the birds chirp all around. I love all of that especially in Vermont. But ultimately, we need to worship by being in the presence of other people who are just not of our own choosing.

When we come here we don't get to choose who shows up. When you come through our door, you are all gift even when the world out there might lead you to think to the contrary. When we worship, we practice the art of listening to people who have needs and perspectives and ways of seeing the world that might be very different than our own. Worship is an exercise in learning to yield. My mother-in-law tells me that she abides by the 75% rule. She said, if I get 75% of what I need in worship, I am doing well. But if I get 100% of what I need, I can be rest assured that one of my neighbors is getting 0%. She would say that realizing someone else is being deprived would take away from her worship experience. In worship, we learn the art of patience and yielding to others even if some things in worship are just not our thing. Welcome to what it means to be in community.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus asked his disciples, "if you had a slave who came to your house after working all day, would you not want to say to them, please come here and take your place at the table and let me serve you." Probably not, Jesus said. Instead, you would probably not want to cook dinner for the slave but have the slave cook dinner for you and tell the slave he would have to wait until you are done. Ouch. When we gather around Christ's table to share the bread and the wine, we live ritually as God would want us to live.

We learn to discover the joy that comes from emptying ourselves for our neighbor and putting their needs ahead of our own. In our world, where people so often climb over others to get ahead and preserve their privilege, we need the Lord's table, where we learn to give thanks and share the bread and wine with our neighbor. In that spirit, we balance the need for us to both be recipients of God's grace and to share God's love with others.

At this table, we get a foretaste of what heaven on earth is all about. So, as disciples, let us gather here as the beloved community to worship the living God.

May we remember that God is so much bigger than we can comprehend and its not all up to us. May we be comforted and challenged by the word of God. May we enter into the living tradition conveyed to us over the centuries.

And finally, may we join our brothers and sisters around the world, and gather around this table where we learn to love and be loved and share the meal Christ prepared for us. Amen.