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“WHY GLORIFY GOD?”

Mark 9.2-9

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As a boy, the way of our home was, if we were in town, we went to worship on Sunday. *Every* Sunday. Even in the summer when most church families were at their cottages in northern Michigan. It was never formalized any more than eating three meals a day or having a bedtime were official. It was just how things were. (This was the idea for last autumn’s Seven-Month Worship Covenant. I challenged you to do your best to attend worship every Sunday, if healthy and in town. So 91 church members, not including children, said yes. Formalizing that has fortified us. If you wish to join us for the second half, blanks are in the pews.)

Anyway, as a boy, my friends would ask, “Why do you go to church every week? Did you commit an awful sin? Is there something wrong with your family?” Today I hear the same incredulity expressed differently. Sometimes practical, efficiency-minded people ask, “I get the part of the church about feeding the poor. I also get teaching children about the Bible and values. But for the life of me, I don’t get what earthly good it does to hear sermons, sing, and pray for an hour, weekly.” They have a point; worship isn’t just one more thing we do, it’s central to all of it.

This question of why worship is difficult to answer. It’s like, you have to be here to get it. So I usually say this: “Have you ever loved anyone? If you have, you know specific behaviors go with it. We do certain things when we are in love, right? Things like surprising our beloved with gifts, sending roses, cooking a tasty meal, writing poetry, looking our best, kissing goodbye, and getting lost in the moment.”

Worship belongs with ridiculous, extravagant, and functionally useless behaviors like these. Praise is what we do when God matters more than anyone or anything in our lives. Worshipping God is like being in love. Of course, as you answer their querulous like this, expect puzzled looks. For many have never been in love—not with God anyway. So our love and our behaviors will seem peculiar to them.

This is the best answer to the question: why praise God? Why worship? But we mostly respond in other ways. Most often we’ll answer this practical-minded, utilitarian question with our practical-minded, utilitarian answers. “I go to church because it feels so friendly.” I enjoy my friends. “I go to church because it gets me through the week.” I go because it helps me cope. “I go to church to learn things not discussed anywhere else.” I like thoughtful exchange. “I go because I enjoy being around beauty.” I go to church for the aesthetics. Mind you, I am not saying anything is wrong with these benefits. Still, as we stress I, me, mine--*my* feelings, *my* thoughts, *my* peace, *my* need--you hear the flaw in this take on why worship God. *Worship becomes all about us and not God.* But God deserves praise like a breathtaking concert cries out for applause. For me, not to do both, is just wrong.

And then a needs-based approach will tilt the church toward marketing itself. “Where do you itch? Let us scratch it for you. We can scratch that itch better

than any other church.” My problem with this mindset is we get so busy looking at ourselves, so obsessed with our perceived needs, we leave little room for God. And like I said last week, coming here is all about making room for God to have his way with us. And if we don’t make that room for God, who will not force his way into our lives, we truly should not complain as the Lord feels distant from us.

Worship can take on the “what is in it for me?” flavor of the world that surrounds the church. Like that is what this world needs. To have the church become one more stop worshipping at the altar of: what have you done for me lately? And this approach raises other questions. How can we give the world the taste for God if we are just one more storefront in America’s ever-expanding shopping mall of self-fulfillment? Doesn’t a “narcissistic society” come into being when people are encouraged to evaluate everything in terms of how it helps, excites, entertains cures and soothes us? Is it the church’s job to encourage that or to counter it? How can we be a transformative power in the world by appealing to self-interest? Can we make ourselves the measure of all things or is God at the center of it all?

I want to worship where God is central to all things, like that scene in Revelation. The martyrs gathered there before God had suffered horribly. But they weren’t elbowing each other out of the way to outdo each other to tell the saddest story. No, they were caught up praising God. In that they found healing and restoration.

I remember having a disagreement with my associate pastor. Time Magazine featured a cover article about the health benefits of praying. It was a fine article. But this pastor started pitching this full force to the congregation as though to claim, “Faith in Christ only takes you to where you already wanted to go anyway.”

“Are you sure you want to be saying that?” I asked her. “Consider the deal you’re striking there. I mean, at what point do we ask people to be less full of self and their agenda, and to be more full of Spirit and what God intends for the world? At what point do we tell them that following a Savior who invited us to pick up his cross is no weekend at the spa? Did Christ create the church to *please* as many as possible? Or to *save* as many as possible?” In truth, God has led me to many places I never would have chosen for myself without first submitting myself in worship—love my enemies, give away my money, forgive any who do me harm.

Why glorify God? Why bother with worship? The best answer is less pleasing. I believe the only ultimate reason for us to come here is *we’re looking for God*. Or maybe because we’ve learned enough about God to know *God is looking for us*.

Frankly, the real reason for worship, the God-centered reason--versus our self-centered reason—doesn’t lend itself to marketing. Of course, we welcome all here, whatever your motives. But once you are here, you notice how we shape and form your motives, just as my sermon attempts now, subversively going after a world where we sit on the throne of our own lives, preferring a world where only God sits on that throne. Of course, in seeking God we are often also given

inspiration, assurance, healing, comfort, hope, and forgiveness. Jesus said seek God's reign, and all these things would be added, all of our needs would be met.

But walking with him, we notice how our needs get redefined along the way. It's ironic how in giving ourselves over to God in service--whether service of praise or service of compassion—we end up feeling served at our deepest levels. This feeling is how God surprises us to get us off the self-agenda on to God's agenda.

So if you seek the control of self-perfecting, the mastery of self-improvement, I'm sorry, you're in the wrong place. The terms of worship aren't for us to control. God's ways aren't our ways. False gods can be manipulated, but not the true and living God. At times like today, it's a great and celebratory spirit. Other times we hear hard truth spoken in love, truth we resist. It's an awe-filled, enigmatic thing to dwell in the hands of the true and living God. God's sacred presence, as the transfiguration reminds us, is mysterious. The key word in that lesson from Mark is *doxa*, or glory. Not our glory, God's glory. Because worship is a lot like being in love and kissing, we don't control it. The only reason to worship is to celebrate the Other. I mean, if anyone kisses a lover to *get* something, it is always shady.

So God is the reason that gathers us. To know God. To know ourselves as Jesus perceived us, as his beloved children. God alone is the center of what worship is. How God meets us; where God surprises us; why God loves and welcomes us. Every benefit in coming to praise God derives from that and they're a by-product.

Marva Dawn writes: "To worship the Lord is--in the world's eyes--a waste of time....By engaging in it, we don't accomplish anything useful in our society's terms....Its purpose is not to gain numbers for our churches or to be seen as successful. Rather, the entire reason for our worship is that God deserves it. Moreover, it isn't even useful for earning points with God, for what we do in worship won't change one whit how God feels about us. We will always be helpless sinners caught in our endless inability to be what we should be or to make ourselves better—and God will always still be merciful, compassionate, and gracious, abounding in steadfast love and ready to forgive us as we come to him."

"Worship is a royal waste of time, but indeed it is royal, for it immerses us in the regal splendor of the King of the cosmos. (Here in worship) we enjoy God's presence in corporate ways that take us out of time and into the eternal purposes of God's kingdom. As a result, we shall all be changed--but not because of anything we do. God, on whom we're centered and to whom we submit, will transform us."

Notice I chose to bring this sermon on a Sunday when Katherine and Company, Dan and our choir, make perfectly obvious why we lend praise: to enjoy God! So let us get back to that enjoyment and not worry about how to make sense of it all. Amen.