

Level Up

August 11, 2024

Why are we here?

Why are we here? I realize that question needs some clarification. I'm not asking it on an existential, metaphysical level, as in, "why do humans exist?" but rather, why are we gathered in church and online?

The easy answer is for worship, but again, why? Perhaps the most classical answer is to offer thanks and praise. Along that line of reasoning, all that we are and all that we have and all that we encounter is a gift from God, and we gather for worship as an act of thanks and praise.

That has some merit, but I think there's more. Another reason a lot of people worship is to learn. Again, a good reason. Most seminaries teach that pastors are not supposed to treat worship as a lecture, but you and I have both seen how many of my colleagues fell asleep during that lesson. Nonetheless, learning the Bible and hymns and interpretations is an important part of the worship experience.

For years now, I've felt called to preach about yet a third reason for worship (and being part of a faith community for that matter) and that is inspiration. To be fair, if these motivations were plotted out on a Venn diagram, they would be three interlocking circles: thanks and praise, learning, and inspiration.

You see, I believe that one of the critical roles of the faith in this day and age is to lift us up from our animal instincts. It's basic human nature to be self-centered. It's basic human nature to gather as many resources as possible to oneself. It's basic human nature to hold grudges. Part of what we do in worship on Sundays is immerse ourselves in a community that practices a higher level of existence than those basic instincts. We gather together, whether physically or across the internet, to be inspired to be different, more, higher, deeper.

In Real Life

Many of you know that I start preparing for each Sunday worship about two months in advance. I read the scriptures, meditate on which lectionary texts God seems to be speaking to me, and start gathering ideas of how these texts might come to life in our lives.

Ever since I read today's passage from Ephesians back in June, I thought it would be interesting to do a modified Lectio Divina in worship today. For those of you not familiar with Lectio Divina, it's an ancient way of praying with the scriptures with roots in the 3rd century and the early church scholar, Origen. Rather than dissecting and analyzing a passage, in Lectio Divina, one listens for what God is speaking to you today through a passage. When we say that the Bible is the "living Word of God," part of what this means is that different passages and phrases will mean different things in different lives at different times.

For instance, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." will mean something very different to someone living in poverty, close to the edge, than it will to someone who is prosperous, in the

prime of their lives. It will mean something different to someone just starting out than it does to someone who knows they have months to live.

I say we're going to do a modified version of Lectio Divina because, in its purest form, one reads the same passage four times, each time going deeper into the text. One modern interpretation of Lectio Divina, which means Holy Reading by the way, suggests that the first time we read a text it is for comprehension. The second reading is to contemplate what word or phrase God is speaking to you today. The third reading is to pray about what God would have you do by virtue of that word or phrase, and the fourth reading is to savor and commit to that course of action.

Because we're engaging this in worship today, and you've already heard our passage once, I'm only going to read it one more time, during which I would have you listen for the word or phrase that seems to be speaking to you. After I'm finished reading, I'd ask those of you who are here in the sanctuary to shout out your word or phrase. Those of you who are online, I'd invite you to type your word or phrase into the chat. For those of you who are visual learners, it can be really helpful to have the passage in front of you, so I invite you to turn to page 194 in your pew Bibles, where we'll start with Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 25.

Ready? Take a couple of deep breaths to put yourself in a spirit of prayer. And now listen for the Word God is speaking to you today:

So then, putting away falsehood, let each of you speak the truth with your neighbor, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Those who steal must give up stealing; rather, let them labor, doing good work with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only what is good for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

What stood out for you? Isn't it fascinating, how we each hear according to what we need, what God would speak to our hearts? What I'd also point out is that Paul doesn't merely say don't speak negatively, don't be angry, don't steal. He adds a positive to each of them. Don't speak falsely, but speak the truth, because we belong to one another. It's not good enough to merely stop stealing; labor earnestly, so that you can actually be about doing good in others' lives. Turn your bitterness and anger and slander into tenderhearted forgiveness, because in that, you will imitate God.

Conclusion

I started out this message today suggesting that part of what we're doing by worshiping and being part of a faith community is attempting to "level up," that is, attempting to engage with the Bible and the Christian Tradition for the purpose of being better than if we were left to our own devices. Poll after poll says Christians are no different than non-Christians, except we're more judgmental, narrow minded, and bigoted...this text, and being part of a faith community, ought to inspire us to be different.

Every so often, when I pick my daughter up from daycare, her caregiver will tell me that she was following some of the other kids in making choices that were less than desirable. This report always ends with, "And so we had a conversation about making Josie choices." The idea being that she knows what good choices are and trying to help her to make those choices rather than following the crowd. With today's readings, I'd suggest that part of why we're here is to be inspired not to merely make Bridget choices or Betty choices or Jeff choices, but to make Jesus choices.

Friends, for too long, Christians have looked at the Letter to the Ephesians, and particularly the passage that comes immediately after the passage we read today, as a checklist, thinking, "If I check these things off, I am a good Christian." But that couldn't be farther from Paul's (and Jesus') intention. Paul's intention is to inspire us to level up, to transcend our base, animal instincts, and in that to make manifest God's presence in the world. We're here because merely holding ourselves to Bridget choices or insert-your-name-here choices isn't enough to bring about the reign of God. The great lie of our era, of our society, of our democracy, is that mere self-interest is sacred. It is not. What is sacred is when we allow the divine to inspire us to be better, kinder, more merciful, more compassionate, more just.

My prayer this week is that your Lectio Divina, the word or phrase that inspired you within our worship today, will help you to be more aligned with the sacred, and that more and more of us will seek this wisdom day in and day out. May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen!

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Psalm 34:1-8, Ephesians 4:25-5:2
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