

Redwoods Presbyterian Church

June 25, 2023

Rev. Keenan Kelsey preaching

“Worship with Awareness”

Isaiah 6:1-6; Colossians 3:15-17; John 4:23-24

Prayer of Illumination

O God of Spirit, be with us now, that our ears may hear, our minds be expanded, and our hearts be full. Bless our hearing and our understanding. Amen.

Today is about worship. Have you given much thought to why we gather each Sunday? Many of you have, I know, but others may have let this time become, well, *pro forma* for you, automatic pilot.

It is anything but that! We heard the Apostle Paul describe worship as a Call: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”

Likewise, the Gospel writer John asks “Is your worship spiritual and real? Do you have the Holy Spirit’s help? Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth... Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves.”

Writer Annie Dillard says that if we knew the power of worship, we would put on flak jackets and helmets before coming!

What is it? What is it that draws us here? Well, first of all I think it is community. It’s not just seeing people we know and care about, but joining in the intentional act of praise and prayer, of receiving and giving, of being sent out better than we were when we came in.

A member of our Bible study said she loved best the prayers we say in unison. Whether we sit silently or whether we speak the words. I agree, I think of my single prayer as a stream running out up to God, via the Holy Spirit. And then I imagine the river, as all our streams of prayer coinciding and inundating the Source of All. That is both comfort and power indeed.

The Presbyterian Book of Common Worship (yes, we do have one of those!) begins with these words: “In an age dominated by individualism and secularism it is particularly important to embrace forms of worship that are firmly rooted in the faith, and foster a strong communal sense of being united with God and with the community of faith in every time and place, and with a broken world in need of God’s healing touch.”

Such gathering in reverence and praise and prayer, has been central to religion for as long as history has been documenting religions, all religions. The Hebrew people were constantly praying, with the Temple as the center. Jesus himself gathered community from the moment he left the wilderness. After resurrection, the disciples huddled not separately but together. When the Holy Spirit burst in upon them, they not only began to preach and heal, but they also established house churches, intentional gatherings.

And so we also gather. Why Sunday instead of Saturday? Well, it is, the first day of the week, is when Jesus followers discovered the empty tomb and met the risen Christ. Actually, we Christians are meant to rest on Saturday, the seventh day; and to worship, or celebrate, on Sunday, the first day.

After all, In the ancient story of creation, this day marked the beginning, the day God spoke light into being, separating light from darkness. So as Jesus brought light to the world, so we gather to remember the words and deeds of Jesus and to celebrate the resurrection and continuing presence of the living Christ. Jesus lived, Jesus died, Jesus rose as a people, and we are that people!

Worship is a time to cultivate THAT relationship.

We need look no further than Isaiah to understand that the relationship begins with awe, with an overpowering sense of majesty and mystery, and within that, gratitude. A friend of mine said, "isn't it a wonder that we have a God we can't possibly exaggerate?" God's steadfast love never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end.

Imagine Isaiah entering the Temple, Yahweh is on the throne with massive flowing robes! Smoke from the sacrifices and censures fill the place so that his eyes can barely discern the giant cherubim and seraphim hovering. The sense of the holiness of God is so overpowering that even the cherubim use two of their six wings to cover their faces, and a great song is lifted, "Holy, Holy, Holy. is the God of Hosts. The whole earth is full of God's glory."

Like Isaiah, we come in praise, In call and song we rejoice in the glory, and declares our intention to pay attention, But also like Isaiah, we too immediately turn to confession.

"Woe to me!" Isaiah cries, "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips." Faced with the goodness and greatness of the Almighty, he is afraid. He feels shame.

Don't we all sometimes feel unworthy? Unlovable, grievously remorseful? acknowledging that alone, we know nothing. We are all beloved children of God, yet the very immensity is humbling. Authentic Worship requires honesty, and honesty requires that the community be grounded in God, which can be done only by recognizing our brokenness.

We acknowledge how often we fall short, or miss the mark.

Such public, or corporate, prayer of confession was part of the very earliest church gatherings. It was John Calvin who made corporate prayer normative for every service of public worship I've known church people who are uncomfortable with this. "I haven't done those things," they complain. "That's not me." But the corporate prayer is a prayer for our *collective* sins --as a church, as a country, as a world. Its words are not meant to be Personal, although they might sometimes fit! We are praying for our sins of the world. Only then so we, move to private prayer to unburden our own guilts or regrets.

We do this in silence, the silence of our hearts. There may be words spoken in your mind. Or it may be just sitting in the Presence. "In worship, in prayer, silence is far more than the absence of sound. It constitutes a vital part of the divine-human dialogue. Where we can experience interchanges with God that would not happen without the silence.

Such an understanding of the immense difference between our humanity and God's holiness does not mock us, it simply recalls for us whose we are, and what our work must be.

And so Isaiah gasps, "I saw the Lord." And an attending angel takes a firestone and touches his mouth: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is forgiven." An assurance of forgiveness. An angel may not touch our lips with a hot coal, but an assurance, or maybe reassurance, of pardon is a major source of spiritual consolation. It is because we trust God's ultimate grace that we are able to tell how we fallen short, and how we want to change. The God of grandeur and splendor becomes the God of love and compassion, and offers a mercy that is intimate, personal, loving.

And then we share the peace. Another ritual of prayer.

Having been reconciled to God in Jesus Christ, we express the reconciliation, unity, and love that come only from God, and we open ourselves to the power of God's love to heal our brokenness and make us agents of that love in the world.

In our design for worship, finally, we are ready to move to faith seeking understanding. We are ready for Scripture and sermon; ready to read and hear and ponder God's words to us through Scripture. Even so, we enter this time with a prayer of illumination, asking Holy Spirit to stay with us so we can learn.

After the sermon, we return to prayer. It is said that there are only two kinds of prayer. Thank you and help me.

Thanksgiving is the response we make to experience of God's goodness. These prayers are personal, rooted in specific experiences, specific examples. By being thankful in prayer, we are more likely to be thankful in our living.

Help me, help us, is the most basic and instinctual form of prayer. We ask God for that which we most dearly seek and desire. We bring our concerns and the concerns of the world. These prayers can be in any spoken form, for we trust God to hear, to understand, to accept.

And then, in unison, we rest with the Lord's prayer. We let ourselves feel our response. The episcopal church defines prayer as the response to God in thought, word, and deed, and the same can be said of worship. I think one could argue that worship is one grand hour of prayer. Even our final blessing is a prayer.

For Isaiah, the resolution of it all came as he heard the Word of God: the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah said, "Here am I! Send me."

Isaiah responded to a commission, a call, to share the news of a caring God the news of a loving God who forgives us when our unworthiness overtakes us. And to take that caring and gracious encounter out into the world in service.

Through our worship, through our visions, our praise, our prayers, our songs, our hearing, our response – through our faithfulness – we, God's people, will live into the new dimensions to which we are called.

Here we are God, send us. Amen.