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The Twenty-First Sunday of Pentecost

Psalm 99

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It goes without saying that Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship the same God. We all bend our knee to the Source and Creator of all that is, seeking to align our wills with that Almighty Will, trying to calibrate our hearts to the Divine Heart. Sure, we may disagree on how this Infinite Source expresses itself in time: Jews believe in the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh as the definitive narrative, Christians believe that this God's life is perfectly expressed and reciprocated back to God in and through the humanity of Jesus, and Muslims believe that God is embodied most fully in and through the teachings of Mohammed. But the whole impetus of monotheism is to underscore the fact that we are all children of the One Eternal Father. This fact is what makes the situation in Israel so heartbreaking. We are children of One Father.

What I want to ask this morning is a rather simple question, and that is why do we worship God? What good does it do? At some level, we can acknowledge that in war-torn, violence-flooded places, to worship is at the very least to put down the weapons and link arms with our nearest sister and brothers and turn our faces towards that Eternal light. Whatever harmful practices we are engaged in, worship is a holy pause. This sacred pause is important, but for me it still doesn't quite get to my question of why we worship. And I can't help but harbor a secret doubt about God.

The doubt is perfectly illustrated in Psalm 99, a Psalm that is all about worship. "Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God and fall down before his footstool" "Proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God and worship him upon his holy hill; for the Lord our God is the Holy One." The Psalmist seems to think that it is good for us to bow down before Greatness. But what does that say about God, and God's character? Does God need our worship? Is there something missing in God that we human beings supply with our regular contributions of praise? A more cynical reframing of the question might be: Is this God who commands our worship a megalomaniac, someone who requires the constant ego reinforcement of our adoration? Why does the Psalmist go to such great lengths to tell God how great God is: "The Lord is great; he is high above all peoples. Let them confess his Name, which is great and awesome."

This makes you think of that scene in Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* when the boys are in church for morning chapel, being led thru prayers by their chaplain. "O Lord you are so... big; so absolutely huge; gosh we are all so impressed with you down here, I can tell you."

I have a lot of sympathy for this humor and these questions. I understand why people who don't practice Christianity find Christian worship odd. But I don't think that God's desire for human worship stems from any kind of divine brokenness. In fact, I think that God's goodness and graciousness toward us flow from God's utter wholeness and self-sufficiency. God is free to love us precisely because God is

not needy as we are. In the perfect communion of the Trinity, God has everything God needs.

Perhaps, then, we are the ones who need to worship God, won't be whole unless we give God thanks and praise. Why?

Because worship is far more than expressive; it is formational. It makes us. It focuses our attention. It orders our priorities. It teaches us what's important and what isn't. As Richard Rohr puts it, we have to be careful, because we will always become the God we worship. Our prayer, our devotion, our praise—these rewire us. They enable us to see, hear, and think in new ways. What we worship makes us who we are.

Dorothy Day was someone you'd consider to be too busy to worship. She was the radical peace activist, union organizer, and founder of the Catholic Worker Movement and its weekly publication. She spent her life feeding the poor – thousands upon thousands of houseless people lined up outside her soup kitchen – and tirelessly raised her voice trying to stem the tide of injustice. But Day was also someone who went to mass every day. She always made time for worship, and at one point someone asked her, “Why do you care so much about worship, why waste your time in church when you could be feeding the hungry, helping the houseless, changing the world?” “People have so great a need to reverence, to worship, and adore, and I've spent my entire life looking for someone or something big enough to hold my heart.” For Day, humanity is on a mad search for something worthy of their hearts. I wonder if this morning if you are looking for something or someone big enough to hold your heart.

It's taken me a while to realize that I'm always worshipping something, whether I notice it or not. If worship is the act of giving honor, reverence, devotion, or admiration to something or someone, then worship truly is as natural as breathing. We're wired to do it: to flock to objects of devotion, to pay exquisite and adoring attention to things that draw our gaze and elicit our respect, to put pretty things on pedestals. We're wired to ascribe greatness to people, places, ideas, and objects outside ourselves.

We do this with athletes and movie stars, political candidates and pundits. We do it at football games and rock concerts, at car dealerships and open houses. Increasingly, we do it with the little gadgets we hold in our hands and manipulate with our thumbs, allowing these compact miracles of technology to capture our attention for hours each day.

What draws my gaze? What holds me captive? What keeps me coming back for more? I am a devotee to these things. A worshiper. These are the things—for better or for worse—that keep me on my knees.

I believe this is why we're commanded to worship God. This is why the ancient psalmist invites his congregants to “worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness” and tremble before him. Why Jesus reminds his first-

century listeners to “worship the Lord your God, and serve only him”. Why, in the book that draws our scriptures to a close, St. John of Patmos describes heavenly worship at glorious scale: “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created”.

If I’m wired and destined to worship, if my worship has the power to make or unmake my heart, then these scriptures make all the sense in the world. They’re reminding me to focus my attention on the only one who is truly good, truly worthy, and truly just. They’re inviting me to align my loves with the divine love. To walk in the way that is the Way and to live in close and intimate company with the one who is the Life.

To be clear, this God we’re commanded to worship is a servant God, one who grew up a peasant under empire, washed the feet of his disciples, rode a donkey into Jerusalem, and wept at his beloved friend’s graveside. This is a God who “emptied himself,” “humbled himself,” and “became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”

This is no narcissist. This is a God who commands my worship so that my heart can be softened into servanthood, gentleness, humility, and love. This is a God who offers me the practice of worship as a gift. Not for God’s benefit, but for mine.

Our hearts long to adore something. Whether we adore our children, adore our spouses, adore that piece of art that hangs in the sitting room, or that author who finds a way to name what we’ve only up til now been able to feel. We don’t think about this often, but adoration is written upon our hearts, and sometimes I wonder if the reason there is so much violence in the world, and so much violence in our hearts is because we’ve forgotten the summons to adoration and worship, the summons to feel small in face of mystery, the natural desire to be swept away by a beauty we could never purchase or manipulate.

We pray today not just for ourselves, but for every Jew and Muslim gathered together to worship, in synagogues in mosques, in living rooms and in streets, praying especially for the Jews and Muslims in Israel and Palestine. We pray that as we all link arms and gather around the Font of Goodness, we may learn to see the good in the other; as we gaze at the Author of peace, we pray this God to write peace on every human heart; and as we Christians worship the humble God, may God remake us into the kinds of people who humbly point the world to the One Great Enough to hold and mend and remake every human heart.

Therefore with the Psalmist: “We proclaim the greatness of the Lord our God and worship him upon his holy hill; for the Lord our God is the Holy One.”