

Worship: It's About Me

February 17, 2019

Caroline Sell

If you were in worship last week, you might be thinking as you look at the sermon title for today, “Butch said that worship is NOT about me? Now you’re saying it *is* about me? Don’t you all work across the hall from one another? Coordinate?”

Yes, we do. And yes - as we continue our 2nd week of a sermon series on worship today you’re invited to think about how worship isn’t about you, as Butch said last week, but also how at the same time it’s all about you and me and all of us.

Let’s begin with prayer -

“Holy God be in our speaking. Be also in our listening and speak to our souls’ deep understanding. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Our scripture reading for today is from the book of the prophet Jeremiah chapter 17 verses 5 through 10. Listen to what the Spirit might be speaking to us, the church:

Thus, says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They shall be like a shrub in the desert and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it? I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.

The lectionary gifted us today with a scripture passage with some fascinating imagery. On the surface, the message seems to be simple: Trust in the Lord and be like this tree: be blessed with peace, happiness, and a never-ending flow of energy. Put your trust in yourself, or other humans, and be like the shrub – dried up, alone, and without nourishment.

The life that comes from putting your trust in God is a valid message, and certainly one worth taking seriously. If we can, I think most of us would choose to be like the tree, putting all our trust in God whose vision it is for us to flourish. And while I believe there’s a lot of truth in this statement, it also doesn’t take but a week volunteering at a hospital or supporting a refugee family or meeting with our Kenya mission partners, who care for infants infected with HIV/AIDS to know that the winds seem to blow harder for some people than others. And sometimes it is these people who are the ones trusting the most.

As a colleague reminded me this week, for those of us who trust as best we can and try to be like the tree - standing without anxiety and with ever-bearing fruit - yet find ourselves still feeling more like the shrub, alone and withered, a simple “trust in God and you will flourish” message just seems too narrow.

Maybe trust is less about bearing the right fruit – saying the right “I put my trust in you” prayer or doing the right daily ritual to show your trust, but more about opening our hearts and seeking closeness with God. Location in our text today is key. While the shrub is located in the barren desert, the tree is next to the stream, the source of its life.

I came across a quote this week by Thomas Merton, a priest and theologian during the first half of the 20th century. I was pretty stoked when I read this quote, thinking, “Ah, man. This one is perfect for the sermon.” I even read it to my husband in excitement.

Merton wrote, “A tree gives glory to God by being a tree.”¹

Let me read that again - “A tree gives glory to God by being a tree.”

Thoughts of preaching a masterful sermon about how the best way we can give glory to God is quite simply by being our most authentic selves spun through my head.

And while I think this would have worked, thankfully I kept reading and found that it would have missed Merton’s point.

Merton continues saying, “Unlike the animals and the trees, it is not enough for us to be what our nature intends. It is not enough for us to be individual [men].”²

Our text today says something similar - “cursed are those who trust in mere mortals.” For both the prophet and Merton, trusting our own humanity, or other’s humanity, doesn’t cut it.

Instead, Merton says “For us, holiness is more than humanity ... the secret of our [my] identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God.”³

“Blessed are those whose trust is in the Lord.” Maybe this trust is less about praying harder or singing louder, and more about remembering who we are, loved and forgiven children of God.

Butch preached a great sermon last week that reminded us that worship isn’t actually about us; worship isn’t about our personal preferences for music or preachers or whether coffee should be in the sanctuary or not. It’s not about whether we pass communion or walk up to receive it. It’s not about whether we prefer worship at 9:30 or 11. Worship, Butch reminded - is not about us. it’s about God.

But at the same time, worship is all about us. Because we are the ones coming before God, we are the created beings seeking the love and mercy of our Creator. Worship *is* about the prayers we pray, the attitude *we* bring, the voice of God that *we* hear. Worship is about sinking our roots as deep as we can into God’s everlasting spring.

We open many worship services with a time of confession and forgiveness as we did today. Our time today was very similar to what we often do at our 11:00 service, but a little more “formal” than what we usually do at our 9:30 service.

I remember sitting in a class my third year of seminary and the professor asking us to share our favorite part of a worship service.

When it was my turn, I found myself saying, “That’s a really good question. I think it’s the time of confession and assurance of forgiveness. I just love to be reminded every week that no matter what, I am forgiven.”

I began seminary as a girl without a favored liturgical tradition, so I remember the surprise I felt when those words came out of my mouth.

Confession and forgiveness is a great example of how worship is all about God – it is God who forgives and loves again and again. But it’s also a great example of how worship is all about us – we are the ones who show up. We are the ones who open ourselves and ask God to search our hearts. We are the ones willing to say “I’m sorry.”

And then we are the ones who risk, opening our hearts to listen closely for the voice that says, “You are loved, and you are forgiven.”

You have probably heard of the Reformer Martin Luther and his famous 95 thesis. Luther is most famous for his condemnation of the sale of indulgences, coins that could be purchased in order for one to be granted forgiveness for their sins. Confession and forgiveness were most important to Luther, so when he saw these abuses happening, he was infuriated.

¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1961, 29.

² Merton, 31.

³ Merton, 31.

For Luther, though, this wasn't just an intellectual bone to pick with the Catholic church. About 15 years before his famous 95 thesis was posted in October 1517, Luther was studying to be a lawyer. The story goes that he found himself in a bad storm in which he barely dodged a lightning strike. Luther interpreted this near-death experience as a sign from God that it was time for a career change.

He writes later that he immediately yelled out to his patron Saint Anne saying - "Help me! I shall become a monk!" And he did - he entered a monastery.⁴

Luther's time in the monastery was not easy, to say the least. Throughout his time there, was tormented by a constant search for, as he put it, "a gracious God." He was imprisoned by some sort of extreme spiritual anxiety in which no matter how hard he tried, he could never be convinced of God's forgiveness toward him.

And so, Luther was tormented by the constant fear that God hated and judged him. In the monastery, there was a clear structure, what was called "the rule," for what one must do to deserve God's forgiveness. Most of all, historians say, "the sinner must make a sincere and complete confession"⁵

Luther was determined to make this "sincere and complete confession" so he pushed both his mind and body on the journey to find a gracious God, or better yet, to experience God's graciousness and therefore experience relief.

Historian Bruce Shelly writes that "Luther pushed his body to health-cracking rigors of austerity. He sometimes fasted for three days and slept without a blanket in freezing winter... No amount of penance, no soothing advice from his superiors could still Luther's conviction that he was a miserable, doomed sinner."⁶

Luther once said, "I kept the rule so strictly that if I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work."⁷

It would be another 10 years before Luther would experience some relief. As he tells the story, he was preparing a set of lectures on the book of Romans when it hit him – it hit him that as Christians our forgiveness doesn't come from doing the right ritual or repeating the same phrase, but instead forgiveness comes because "we are justified by grace through faith."⁸ Forgiveness, he realized, is a gift and not something that can be earned.

There may not have been a lightning strike this time, but this was certainly another conversion experience for Luther. He wrote, "Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates."⁹

Luther struggled for years, seeking a gracious God, trying to trust God more, but like he trusted enough or was good enough to deserve God's affection.

Certainly, Luther isn't the last person to find themselves in this struggle, trying to trust in God but continuing to fall short. And maybe some of you have been in his shoes – walking into this space or another worship space feeling unworthy or sitting before a pastor or another Christian friend feeling insufficient.

Or maybe you've worried that you don't pray enough, or read Scripture enough, or give enough, or take a stand for justice enough.... Or that you're just not "enough?"

One of my professors used to say that, in his opinion, "The only serious form of religious question today is, 'Does God have regard for me?' or 'Am I a source of delight to the source of my delight?'"¹⁰

⁴ Luther quoted in *The Story of Christian Theology* by Roger E. Olson (Intervarsity Press 1999), 375.

⁵ David C. Steinmetz, *Luther in Context* (Indiana University Press, 1986), 5. Quoted in *The Story of Christian Theology*

⁶ Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* (Word Publishing, 1982), 203.

⁷ Shelley 203.

⁸ Romans 3:24

⁹ Luther quoted in *The Story of Christian Theology*, 377.

¹⁰ Craig Dykstra, lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary, 2016.

In other words, “Does that God who I praised last week echo this praise about me? Does the God whom I adore also adore me?”

The answer, we were reminded as the water poured into the baptismal font and remembered God’s steadfast love for us, is an unwavering “yes.”

It was during Jesus’ own baptism that a voice was heard from the heavens saying, “In you I am well pleased,” This same voice speaks to us each day saying, “You are my child, my beloved, and in you, I delight.”

“Blessed is the one whose trust is in the Lord,” Jeremiah reminds us.

Perhaps opening our hearts to this reality is the greatest act of trust there is. When we open our hearts in worship our roots sink into God’s everlasting spring. And we are reminded again that yes, you and me, as hard as it might be to believe, we are loved beyond measure. We are enough.

Amen.