

15th Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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August 28th, 2016

I want to take a moment and re-read a small portion of our Hebrews text:
¹⁵ Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

I want to put a tag on this text and for a moment – with your prayers – I want to remind you that “It’s Not About Me.” It’s also not about you.

George Barna is a popular name in the Christian community. Barna and his Barna Group have become well known, surveying Christians and non-Christians on religious issues. In a 2012 research study on worship, Barna found some disturbing facts. Among regular church going adults, one third said that they have never experienced God’s presence in worship. One half of all regular church members claimed that they have not experienced God in a worship service in the past year.

When I saw the results of this study, a number of things came to my mind. I thought that the church is dropping the ball when it comes to leading people into worship if half of its members are not experiencing God in worship. Then I got to wonder if it was more about pastors (of which I’m one) not leading the people into a worshipful experience where they can experience God. Then my mind went to the question: Has worship ever done those people any good?

My mind went from question to question. And then I realized I was asking all the wrong questions. All of the questions were focused on me or the people in the pews. They all boiled down to “Is worship pleasing to me or to others?” That’s not where we should start a conversation on worship. That’s because it’s not about me. It’s not about you. The question that I need to ask is, “Is my worship pleasing to God?”

This isn’t a new question. When we consider the worship that we find in the Old Testament, there was a prescribed system to which the Israelites were asked to adhere. It was a system whose goal was to engender heartfelt worship. But much of the time that wasn’t the result. God complained that they would come to the altar, participate in the sacrifices, then they would leave unchallenged and unchanged. In other words, the liturgy became important to them, but it was more a matter of appearance as opposed to the heart. And every time they went through the motions, it was evidence of spiritual immaturity.

It reminds me of an older sister who was sitting next to her younger brother in church one Sunday morning and she was unsuccessfully trying to keep him still and quiet. Finally she said, “I wish you would calm down.”

“I can’t”, he said, “it’s just so boring.”

With that his sister turned and said, “It’s supposed to be boring. Now shush!”

Worship isn’t supposed to be entertaining, but it’s not supposed to be boring, either. At its core, worship is to be a deep respect for the holiness, majesty, and power of God in our midst. When we come to worship, it is time for and about God.

That means that over and over again I need to be reminded that worship isn’t about me. It’s not about me!

Sometimes we may be tempted to come out of a service and say, “I didn’t get anything out of church.” When I’ve heard people say that, I always respond, “What did you give God?” And, did you come to church with your heart prepared to give?”

If you come away from church having scrutinized the choir, the worship team, the organist, the sound, the ushers, the preacher, then you miss the point of being here or at any service of worship. We’re here to give God glory, not to get some feeling and blessing.

But here is the truth that corresponds to it: When we give God glory – when that is what’s really on our heart – God will bless us in response to our worship of our creator. We’ll recognize God’s presence as we recognize the truth about God and ourselves.

Sisters and brothers, let’s get our worship right. It’s not about me and you. It’s about God.

It’s about God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

So, we have a responsibility to **powerfully express God’s greatness.**

Powerfully express God’s greatness! We’re not supposed to offer wimpy expressions. They’re supposed to be powerful. That means we don’t say things with a milquetoast approach, “Oh, how great God is...”

This is exciting news.

We have a great God!

We have a fantastic Savior!

We have a tremendous Lord!

We need to express this powerfully and not let ourselves be distracted!

But this is the very thing that has happened to us as a church.

Over the past 20 years many churches – and the ELCA as a whole – has put lots of emphasis on worship styles and preferences. Traditional or contemporary? Under an hour or over an hour? Children in worship on a staffed nursery? Piano or organ? These questions constantly get asked, but the problem is they've gotten us off track.

Worship styles and preferences have become a distraction, making us lose track of why we are here. We have been distracted from powerfully expressing God's greatness. We come into the house of the Lord with the goal of being blessed – what will I get out of it? – when our goal should be setting our hearts on praising God.

We need give attention to this assignment of powerfully expressing God's greatness. We need to be constantly communicating about the wonders of God.

Why? Glad you asked! It's because God wants more.

Jesus explains this in the gospel of John when he says...

“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.”ⁱ

God wants more true worshippers. God wants more people knowing the Lord and the blessing of being in relationship with our creator. God wants more people in God's kingdom and doesn't want any to perish.

I'm going to share with you something that totally goes against what the Lutheran church in America has taught for decades: If we really want to worship and honor God, we will seek out more worshippers. Not just have a nice welcoming statement. Not having a daycare program or VBS. Not creating better

programs or activities. To really worship and honor God, each one of us needs to actively seek more worshippers.

We won't settle for what we have.

We will seek for more to come.

We will let go of our preoccupation with form and structures because they are making us forget what God really wants.

God wants more!

We'll powerfully express God's greatness so that more people will participate in the worship of God.

Our preaching text for today show us two actions that demonstrate how we can powerfully express God's greatness.

The first action is **PROCLAIMING**.

We are to worship persistently every day. We're to continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God. Don't stop! Like our prayer, it's supposed to be a steady, never ending stream. It's like Niagara Falls.

There are millions of gallons that rush over that cataract every day. Yet for every drop that falls another is waiting to take its place. It just keeps coming!

When it comes to our worship, it's not water going down; it's our praises rising up. We're to continually yield up an offering of praise. That's the start of proclaiming.

Here's the thing: If we only offer worship and praise on Sunday, we're in trouble. We can't powerfully express God's greatness if we only do it on Sunday. If it's to be continual, it needs to be Monday through Saturday, also. It's every day and anywhere. We're to have lives that worship persistently and continually.

The implications of this are profound. When our personal focus on worship is primarily the Sunday morning service (what we're doing right now), we'll struggle to live out our faith throughout the week. Your relationship with and worship of God must be a constant –always there! – so that when you come together on Sunday you'll have the right perspective of what you're about as a church.

A quote that I've heard attributed to 15th century bishop John Fisher (but I can't confirm) expresses this well:

It's our life, not a worship service, that will make us worshippers. We don't go to church to worship; we go to church because we are already worshippers. And if someone is a true worshipper, which means their whole life is an act of worship, then what happens for thirty minutes of music once a week is a small thing indeed.

Again, worship isn't about me. It isn't about the way I prefer to worship God. Worship is about a heart that gives to God.

It's about the fellowship of believers giving unity of voice.

It's about being one powerful proclamation of how great God is and the great things God continues to do.

It's also about desiring more worshippers of Jesus and seeing that we do all that we can to see more come into the kingdom. For this to happen, we must give costly praise.

The text tells us that we're to offer a sacrifice of praise. In other words, it needs to cost us something.

"A sacrifice of praise." There's even a gospel song that says, "We bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the Lord." It sounds like a nice phrase but I don't think we understand the full meaning of those words.

Let me put it like this: an insurance agent found that young drivers were one of the most difficult groups to insure because of the high cost. One day he had a 19-year-old who had just gotten an expensive new car come into the office to add coverage. After filling out the necessary paper work, he cringed as he told her it would cost "twelve seventy-five."

When the young man replied, "I don't have any checks, but I do have cash," the agent was stunned that this 19-year old would have that much cash on him. The teen reached into his pocket...and handed the agent a \$20 bill.

I'm sure it was a wakeup call to him when he discovered that he hadn't counted the cost correctly.

Sisters and brothers, we need to acknowledge what God has done for us. Here's the thing: it's more than acknowledging it. It's telling the good news.

God is worthy of praise!

It must be told here at church.

It must be reinforced at home.

It must be share at work and school.

It must be proclaimed on the street.

We are to give a sacrifice of praise!

But there's more. We must also communicate this graciously so that it make sense.

Psalm 96 says, "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples."ⁱⁱ The Israelites weren't supposed to be satisfied with celebrating God just within the covenant community. God's glory and goodness and greatness was to be declared to all nations. In other words, we are to powerfully express God's greatness to those that do not know about it.

The articulate African apostle Paul was concerned about that in the church in Corinth. There were believers there using the spiritual gift of tongues indiscriminately and it was causing confusion.

²³ So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

²⁴ But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, ²⁵ as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"ⁱⁱⁱ

According to Paul, when believers get together, it's to make sense to those that are hearing, and especially to those that don't believe. That's because God is seeking worshippers. So we are to make sense in this sanctuary because we're to be eager for the unchurched to be drawn into a genuine worship of God.

This is practical, folks. Those on the inside must care about those on the outside and strive to include them. You need to be aware of seekers in your midst, the ones looking for solutions to life. You need to pay attention to the experience of your guests and make sure that as you powerfully express God's greatness that it makes sense – that it reaches into their hearts.

Don't give up on the truth of Scripture.

Don't give up on our doctrinal statement.

Do work to make these things understandable and accessible.

Worship with joy! We do our mission an injustice if we don't do it joyfully.

Unchurched and de-churched folks watch us worship. They observe the joy that we feel. They see how we value God's Word and how we respond to it. They hear how the Bible answers the problems and questions of life. They notice how

worship encourages, strengthens and changes us. They sense when God is truly present in a service, even though they don't know how to explain it.

At the beginning of worship, we sang the hymn "Gather Us In." I could tell that it was a favorite for some of you because you were singing it with joy and energy. Some of you might have the same type of response when you sing "Lift High the Cross" or "I Was There to Hear Your Boring Cry." There's something about singing that favorite hymn that gives us great joy and excitement. We need to have that same energy not only when we worship the Lord every day! That's because worship is an essential part of God's strategy for building God's kingdom and drawing others to it.

The first actions for powerfully expressing God's greatness is proclaiming. The second action is **DOING**.

Verse 16 says, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." As believers in Christ... As followers of The Way... Worship is everything we do in life. It isn't limited to just what we do in church. The way we treat people is an act of worship. The way we talk is an act of worship. That means we need to allow God's greatness to transform our heart.

One of my favorite Bible verses is Romans 12:2. It's easy to just think of it as a prescription for our individual lives. It took me years to realize that verse one must be included with it to fully understand the language of worship that Paul uses. Listen to it:

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed

by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”^{iv}

When we become convinced of God's greatness and God's love penetrates into our soul, our motivation changes. We no longer live for self. Instead, we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice. We live to serve and that life is a life of worship. When our life becomes worship, we prove God's presence by showing love.

God's presence isn't wrapped up in a physical building. It's a personal building. It's you and me. And we powerfully express God's greatness when we love each other...

When we love our neighbor...

And yes, when we love our enemies. When we love, it communicates God's greatness.

When an unchurched person experiences an act of love from a Christian, it's a powerful expression of God's greatness. And as that person turns to the Lord, the Lord opens the spiritual ears that have previously been unable to hear. This includes the ability to hear God saying, "I love you!"

It happens because a church-goer like you and me dared to worship God by communicating God's greatness through love.

“...let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”^v

Sisters and brothers, when we powerfully proclaim... When we lovingly do... When we continually offer the sacrifice of praise that is pleasing to God, we demonstrate God's goodness in a world filled with evil and pain.

When we act with kindness...

When we act with compassion...

When we act with generosity....

When we give of ourselves...

We powerfully express the greatness of God.

A quote that is often misattributed to Winston Churchill says, “You make a living by what you get...you make a life by what you give.” In this time of increasing hate and violence in our country and the world, what Churchill really said is more appropriate for us:

What is the use of living, if it be not to strive for noble causes and to make this muddled world a better place for those who will live in it after we are gone? How else can we put ourselves in harmonious relation with the great verities and consolations of the infinite and the eternal? And I avow my faith that we are marching towards better days. Humanity will not be cast down. We are going on swinging bravely forward along the grand high road and already behind the distant mountains is the promise of the sun.^{vi}

Sisters and brothers, to make the most of our God-given life and give it back to God... To make this muddled world a better place, we need to powerfully express God’s greatness in worship by proclaiming and doing what is pleasing to God. Not just on Sunday mornings but every day – every moment – of our lives. When you realize all of this, you’ll understand that it’s not about you. It’s not about me. It’s all about God.

Amen.

ⁱ John 4:23 (NIV)

ⁱⁱ Psalm 96:3 (NIV)

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 14:23-25 (NIV)

^{iv} Romans 12:1-2 (NIV)

^v Hebrews 13:15b-16 (NRSV)

^{vi} <http://www.businessinsider.com/10-famous-quotes-that-are-misattributed-2011-7?op=1/#u-make-a-living-by-what-you-get-you-make-a-life-by-what-you-give-2>