

“...To Glorify God and Enjoy Him Forever”

Today’s gospel lesson from Mark is a brief account of the transfiguration of Jesus upon the mountain. In one great, stunning, mystical moment, the veil is drawn back and three of Jesus’ disciples see who he truly is. This is a high point in Mark’s story of Jesus. Over the last several Sundays, I have noted that Mark places strong emphasis on keeping the secret as to “who” Jesus really is. Several times Jesus is heard saying, *See to it that you tell no one about your healing!* However, here and now on the mountaintop there is no secret. The vision and the voice both proclaim Jesus as the beloved ... the one sent to save the world. Whatever we are to make of this story on the mountaintop, we know it to be a moment of worship ... a special time when human beings are brought very close to the glory of God. Yes, this moment of transfiguration is the embodiment of worship.

Of course, when we hear the word “worship” and think about it’s meaning, we have a problem ... especially when we encounter a biblical story such as today’s Gospel lesson. We are left wondering, “What are we to make out of this?” Indeed, what are *we* to make out of this? And therein lays our problem. The modern world has taught us to place ourselves at the center of the world ... and to judge all experiences and events by what *we* can make out of them. However, the transfiguration of Jesus arises not out of the hearts and minds of the disciples! Rather the transfiguration is something brought *to* the disciples ... it is a vision from outside of themselves. The transfiguration is not something that they or we are to make something out of, but rather the transfiguration is something from the outside that makes something of them ... that makes something of us!

Mark’s transfiguration story, then, provides us with an opportunity to think together about the worship of God ... about this ordinary Sunday activity that makes the church so extraordinary in a society that has great deal of difficulty reflecting in depth on things other than itself. Worship is a time to be with God, to adore and delight in the One who has loved us in Christ and is therefore to *be* loved, as stated in Revelations: *For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you.*

People who find other things to do during this day and time probably ask the question, “Why worship?” My first response to this question is more questions. Why kiss someone you love? Or, for that matter, why send roses, write sentimental poetry, send special cards, put on your best dress or suit, or act crazy and stupid when you’re in love? It’s all rather ridiculous, useless behavior that to an outside observer would seem not to do anyone much lasting good. Of course, that’s the problem: an “outside observer” can hardly judge the meaning or the appropriateness of the basic antics of lovers. It only makes sense, if sense is needed, to those who are actually in love. Worship is much, much more than that.

The word “worship” comes from the Old English “worth-ship”. Worship happens only if you think something in life is worthy and worthwhile. You can only clench your fist and scream “Why me?” only if you think that someone “out there” cares about you and has plans for you that you cannot discern. Of course, our question “why worship” reveals something about us. Invariably, behind the “why worship” is the more revealing “what is in it for me?” We are interested only if we can be assured of some benefit, some payoff for us. Satirist Tom Wolfe has labeled us the “Me Generation.” Christopher Lasch has called us the “narcissistic society.” In our “do your own thing” culture all people, experiences, activities, are judged on the basis of how well they help, or cure, or excite, or soothe *me*. We are offered myriads of self-help techniques --- weekend marathons, assertiveness training, primal screaming, meditation – all of which promise to do something for the “adorable me.”

In Philip Rieff’s book, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, a new character type emerges: “psychological man.” Psychological man *uses* the community for his or her own self-enhancement, but feels no commitment to any community. The individual person is the center of value ... the one who is more interested in being “pleased” than “saved.” Satisfaction is their goal more than salvation ... self-fulfillment their purpose more than self-investment. Christian worship is bound to be judged irrelevant in a culture that is unable to see beyond the limited confines of its own nose ... in a culture that assumes that reality can be adequately described and experienced wholly within the self ... in a culture that cannot see even the neighbor – much less God – because it is so busy looking at its own vaunted needs and self-authenticated truths, and valuing things, people, and experiences only for what they can give.

Writes one author: “Worship is a counter-cultural activity in a hedonistic, auto-salvation-oriented, pragmatic, utilitarian society. Worship is scandalously useless.” Yes, worship serves no more worthy purpose than the joy of being with the God who loves and is therefore loved. Worship ranks somewhere near the top of the list of other useless and purposeless activities such as singing songs, hugging and kissing, giving gifts without expecting anything in return, random acts of

kindness, sitting quietly with a good friend, or doing nothing but watching a gorgeous winter sunset. We can't really blame those busy, serious folks, who look at worship and wonder, "Why worship? What's in it for *me*?" Their very question answers itself, because ... for someone like them ... nothing!

Unfortunately, the church, in its never-ending flirtation with the culture becomes a marketplace that peddles anything the culture happens to be buying at the time. When culture is in the market for self-gratification and self-centeredness, we have been all too willing to give it what it thought it wanted. When asked, "why worship," we are quick to point out all the valuable benefits of worshipping God. While few enlightened Christians admit to the crudity of expecting God to give them a Mercedes-Benz in appreciation for an hour in church, people nevertheless do expect "inspiration" or at minimum, "a warm fuzzy feeling" on a Sunday morning. Then there are churches that advertise they are "the friendliest church in town," and they decide to peddle fellowship rather than feelings. Some churches assure people that worship is therapeutic ("*It helps me make it through the week*"), or good for the nerves ("*I feel a sort of inner peace after I've been to church*"), or stimulating to the intellect ("*I like a sermon that makes me think or see something a new way*"), or conducive for building of a unified congregation ("*The more we get together, the happier we'll be*"), or a pep rally for the church's latest program ("*We're only here this morning to get motivated to serve the world*").

I not trying to be sarcastic ... However, when you hear those statements, notice the focus. It's all the same. The focus is on my feelings, my thoughts, my commitments, my guilt, and my needs ... me! I am the center of worship, the focus of the carefully orchestrated series of Sunday morning activities that are designed to do something to or for *me*. We are so busy looking at ourselves, is there any wonder why we sometimes miss God? Where is God in all this? Why are you here this morning at worship? Here's what I think.

You are here in church for worship, because you are looking for something beyond yourself, beyond your world. I think you are searching for God! Now you may be here every Sunday morning, week-in-week-out ... in spite of all the good modern endeavors that the church does *not* do well ... in spite of all my shortcomings as worship leaders. Yes, basically you are here looking for God! Or perhaps you are here because you have the notion that God is looking for you. Perhaps you are seeking, or more accurately, perhaps you are here hoping to be found. Or perhaps you gather not even or so "useful" a purpose as that. Perhaps you worship for nothing more than, in the words of the old Calvinists, "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." True! Stop and think ... what more revolutionary, subversive activity can we undertake in this "Me Generation" than to be caught singing the Doxology?

At times, I fear the Church of Jesus Christ turns in on itself and peddles friendliness, inspiration, warm feelings, happiness, intellectual stimulation, moral edification, and distribution of interesting information when it no longer has God ... when it loses that scandalous New Testament church confidence that the God we long to meet has already come ... and is waiting to meet us. When we cease being so impressed with our "whys and wherefores," and dare to come here, on those good and all-too-rare occasions when we meet ... we find that God is already here to give us what we need. Sometimes what we get is not what we expected. Sometimes there is inspiration; there is assurance; there is healing; there is revelation; there is forgiveness ... there is hope. It is one of those strange ironies that, even as we serve God, we are the ones who end up being served in this service of worship. But just as often there is judgment, ordinariness, fear, confusion, despair, awe, and dread. Remember, when we come here, we are being met by the *living* God, and not by our more agreeable false gods. If you do not wish to risk so threatening and mysterious a presence, then you best not come to the worship.

All "good" that comes from worship, whether it be what we ask for and thought we wanted, or what we have spent Monday through Saturday avoiding, is pure by-product ... for the main gift we receive is God. Behind all our wants, our deepest questions, and beyond even our very best answers, we discover, hopefully, in worship that *the surprise* was what we wanted all along, or should I say that it was God who inquired after us, sought us, and wanted us all along. Coming to worship has only one good purpose in mind ... that God might meet *us* here, and surprise *us*, and love *us*, and forgive *us*, and enjoy us forever.

Let us pray: Lord, thank You for Sunday. Thank You for a day of rest, a day when we have no more pressing business than to gather, to sing, to sit, to pray, to listen, to rest easy in Your grace. We confess that we are too busy, too self-absorbed, too concerned about what we *ought* to do next and how we look, and what we ought to feel. O Lord, cure us of our self-absorption. During this hour of worship, draw us out of ourselves and towards you. Allure us, O God, and beckon us. Then, let us relax, let down our guard, and bask in Your glory. Amen!