

May 9, 2021

“Who or What Do We Worship?”

Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake

Psalm 98 1-9

*O sing to the Lord a new song,
for God has done marvelous things.
His right hand and his holy arm
have gotten him victory.
The Lord has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God.
Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.*

John 15:9-17

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Sermon “Who or What Do We Worship?”

I have always been fascinated by patterns in human behavior. As part of my education I’ve had courses in anthropology and religion, the philosophy of religion, and world religions. I even taught world religions at a community college for a few years, enjoying every minute of it.

When we study different cultures we learn so much about what it means to be human in a broader sense. It is in studying those patterns that anthropologists have learned, that religion is universal to ALL cultures.

That means that even those remote cultures, cut off from the rest of the world, evolving separately from others, developed religions. There have been millions of gods and goddesses worshipped throughout human history and estimates of current deities being worshipped is around 100,000.

It is inherent to being human to worship something, to pray to something. It is in our very being to look to something outside of ourselves for comfort and for accountability. And within each of those religions other patterns emerge.

They are forgiveness, cooperation, empathy, love for God, gods or goddesses and the golden rule, “treat others like you want to be treated”, worded slightly differently but a part of every major religion.

All of these things are integral parts of the human experience. Other important universal patterns of all cultures is the need to learn, to figure out stuff, to explain, to discover, to explore, to invent, to build, to create community, to work hard, to protect our children, to make music and art and to love.

We are absolutely fascinating creatures. But the flip side is that along with those beautiful things that we also evolved to be violent, greedy, arrogant, controlling, and destructive. Religions and faith by design are supposed to keep all these baser instincts in check. But we know it often doesn’t work that way.

Philosopher-theologians, St. Anselm and Renee Descartes both argued that it is the very idea of God in our minds that is proof that God exists. The Creator’s stamp on our soul, like a “Made by God” sticker on each of us. They theorized that our intuition about God and our conscience in and of itself makes us hardwired to worship.

Every single one of us is built to worship something and when we worship there is a calmness, a feeling of wholeness that comes over us. A sense of renewal, a sense of connection, a feeling of being lost and then found when we take the time to worship or meditate.

But when that instinct gets interrupted, twisted, or perverted then we are in trouble. When we can’t connect to God in a healthy way it is hard for us to find that wholeness and peace again.

We begin to worship the wrong things as an attempt to fill that void, finite things like; power, money, our own self interest and security, politicians, hate, celebrities, things we are addicted to, and the green grass on the other side of the fence.

Without God we can cave into the disease of “more”. The empty pursuit of things not of the spirit. Without God we are easy prey for those that profit from our fear, our addictions, and our vanity.

In other words, every human needs God or at least a set of values that can serve as a way to keep their baser instincts in check and help comfort us, soothe us, and give our lives deeper meaning.

And it can't just be lip service, a pseudo identity for those who want to feel a part of a religion so they can feel superior to the other 7 billion people in the world. That is just worshipping superiority. We are built to worship, to connect, to surrender, to serve God, and to let God guide our actions and further evolve us to be better human beings, increase our compassion, our empathy and our capacity to love.

Worship is also essential to our ability to cope with the heartache, the grief, the struggles and to have a reason to hope. It comforts us and challenges us and makes us feel like a part of something bigger than ourselves. We each have an invisible cord that binds us to our creator and worship strengthens the cord.

I personally prefer the religion that gave me Jesus, that gave me scriptures like what was read today, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” But, I also believe that all attempts to access God, to be close to God are honored by God as long as those attempts are not wrapped in superiority, abuse to women and children, human sacrifice and/or hate.

In all the major religions, including our own, there are scriptures. Many scriptures speak of love and compassion for the poor and caring for each other as well as scriptures that are violent and controlling and instruct us in ways that only serve to divide and destroy and judge each other even more.

That's where our free will comes in, to choose what our focus is on in the scriptures, to choose the better qualities humans have used to describe God, and to follow our intuition about who God wants us to be.

I am convicted that God wants to move us toward a more just, peaceful and loving world and I am convinced that is the only course we have to survive our baser selves.

There will always be selfishness, greed, arrogance, ignorance and hate but the more we embody Jesus's values the more likely it will be that humanity will still be here 200 years from now.

It is vital that we hold onto the scriptures that can counter the hate in our own bible, the scriptures that are hateful toward anybody that doesn't believe like us and holds onto images of the vengeful, angry God more than Jesus' God of infinite love and giver of peace.

I want you to take some time this week to ask yourself what your image of God is? Who do you worship? And is that image truly consistent with who you have become? If God is white and male maybe you need to download and install an upgrade but maybe not, if that's working for you.

If Jesus is a fair-skin, blue-eyed blonde you might think about the fact that there are no white people in the bible. None. But my point is not to get you to change, seriously whatever works for you is what is important and I don't want to mess with that.

But ask yourself would the same image of God resonate for someone with a darker complexion or someone abused by his Father or a woman violated by a man. Nobody is asking us to change, but can we accept that others may need to hold an image of God that is Motherly? Or genderless? Or has a darker complexion?

Hear this, because it is really important. Living peacefully together in the world, accepting differences is not about having to change ourselves. It's not about having something forced upon us, it is about accepting that others have the right to believe what they need to believe, and to not judge others that find an image of God that gives them access to what we already have, a relationship with a God that is love.

In the vitriolic ignorance and hateful actions that seem to be rampant in our culture there is so much noise about Christianity being under attack, people being forced to accept differences, kids being force fed different religions or no religion in public schools.

This is all meant to scare you, to threaten you, manipulate you into being mad and pander to your baser instincts so you will keep tuning in to find out how to survive the attack of the nameless heathens. Accepting other's freedom does not take away your own.

Accepting the other's right to their own images, accepting other religions as valid to others, does not change who you get to worship, to love and to hold onto. Allowing others to worship who they need to worship does not change the tie that binds you to your creator and to your faith.

Being Mother's day, I hand picked some images from our own scriptures that help us to see that God CAN be all things to all people and that's okay.

Right off the get go in chapter one of Genesis "Humankind was created as God's reflection: in the divine image God created them; female and male, God made them."

And in Hosea "I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them."

In Deuteronomy “You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth.”

And Isaiah: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you”; and again in Isaiah: God says “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.”

May we remember this, that no matter what our image of God. God will not forget us. AMEN

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WHO OR WHAT DO WE WORSHIP?

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