

Grace to you and peace, from God, the Source of life, and from Jesus the Christ, who is that life of God in the world. Amen.

Last week I gave you homework. I invited you to identify a teaching that stands out to you from Jesus, or a teaching of Jesus that amazes you, the way it did the Pharisees in our Gospel reading for the previous Sunday. Any luck with that?

Well, the one that continues to stand out to me is “Love your enemies.” We’ll be hearing more about that in the weeks to come. But I invite you to continue to think about Jesus’s teachings. Many of them were revolutionary, and in the case of “loving your enemies,” unprecedented in the ancient world.

This week, instead of asking you a question, I’ve asked *myself* a question; only this time, it’s in reference to a sermon I preached last Reformation Sunday that stood out; it seemed to be effective. It’s a tradition I keep every year on Reformation Sunday, to go back over the previous year and to select what I consider to be the most effective sermon, revise it and share it again. I chose this for two reasons. First, as John Kavanaugh said to me that day, that Sunday after I preached, “We should hear that sermon every few months!” And I thought, right there, “This is important. I finally got it right.” So it’s for that reason that I thought it was an easy choice.

There’s a second reason for why I chose this, and I will share that with you at the end.

Our question for today is, “What is worship? And why are we here?”

Worship is a time where we set aside all the demands placed upon us so that we can focus on what matters most in our lives, namely God, the source of life and the sustainer of all—but what does it all mean?

Why do we sing?

Why do we share the peace?

Why do we listen to a sermon?

Why do we receive the sacrament?

Why in short, are we here? What are we doing when we worship God? What is the purpose of worship? And why does it matter?

Now, before I attempt to answer these questions, I’d like all of us to let out a collective sigh of relief: ready? Why? Because I’m *not* going to drag you through every detail of the worship service, no matter how interesting I find it personally. (And I do. I’m a geek!) Instead, I would simply like to highlight a few details of the service to deepen our understanding, so that none of us, myself included, take worship for granted. If you’ve ever wondered then why we say the Creed, or what happens when we

celebrate communion, then this morning's message is for you. (And if not, you might learn something anyway.)

We started with Confession and Forgiveness today. Did you know our worship service has four distinct parts, distinct acts, you might say, of a play? If so, after Confession, can you name them?

Well, first we have the gathering at the beginning. That's Act One.

Then we hear the Word in the reading of the lessons, the sermon and the Hymn of the Day. That's Act Two.

And we have a meal where we receive what I call "the food of forgiveness." That's Act Three.

And finally, we are sent out into the world as forgiven sinners to be Christ to our neighbor, especially our neighbor in need. That's Act Four.

Gathering, Word, Meal, Sending... These four acts are preceded by Confession and Forgiveness. But here's the funny thing. Confession and Forgiveness are not part of the play. They are its Prologue. When we confess our sins together, we stand before God before the service begins, to prepare ourselves for what is about to unfold, which is why we deliberately include within Confession, a moment of silence for reflection and focus.

So, what do we confess? Well, for my part, the Rite of Confession in the old "Green Book", the Lutheran Book of Worship, (which, after the Bible falling from heaven, *it* fell from heaven) the Green Book, that's what I grew up [with] as a Lutheran, captures it best. Listen closely:

"Most Merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone; we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your way, to the glory of your Holy Name. Amen."

Now, that's a confession; notice the language, "we are in bondage to sin." We are powerless, we cannot free ourselves. Now, "sin" here is more than "missing the mark," as it's typically defined. It's not simply doing something wrong. Implicit in this confession, is a definition of sin as an *inclination* and *orientation*, or even better, an *addiction*. Paul calls it a power that overcomes us and compels us to do things that harm ourselves and other people. The Gospel of John talks about, as we heard today, being a slave to sin.

All of these texts are pointing to a deeper understanding. They're suggesting that the symptoms of sin, which are the individual acts, lead to an underlying disease. I like to put it this way. Like a roly-poly – and you know what a roly-poly is, right? That's – (We used to call those "pillbugs." I moved up to the Northwest and it was "roly-poly"

and I was like, “I wonder why they changed this thing? I was really doing great with pillbug!) – but a pillbug or roly-poly, as you know, does *what* when you touch it? Closes up, right! And like a roly-poly, when sin touches us, it *turns us in on ourselves*, it makes us self-centered; something Charles Darwin actually confirms in his theory of evolution.

Human beings are self-centered for the sake of survival, but something went wrong. We are *excessively* self-centered in ways now that are damaging not only our neighborhood and society, but the whole world. Even when we become aware of this tendency, as Paul teaches in Romans 7, we still find ourselves in its grip. That said, naming our powerlessness, as we did in the Confession, does something positive, as 12-Step programs like AA have recognized for nearly a century: it can free us. It can open us up, however, fleetingly, to God and neighbor.

Now we are ready. Now we have a second chance. Now our worship can truly begin. That’s all there in the Rite of Confession. It’s the one time, I think, in this culture, where we are invited to look within and seriously contemplate how our self-centeredness has affected our relationship with God and other people. But it doesn’t stop there. By admitting that we are in bondage to sin, we are paradoxically freed, as AA groups for nearly a century have been saying all along.

Our first act in the play after the prologue is Gathering. Now anyone who knows their Bible will recognize the service’s opening words. They come from the Apostle Paul, who typically begins his letters by saying, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” to which you reply: “And also with you.”

But why? Why do we do that? Why do you do that? Are you (A) simply being polite? Are you (B) simply following the liturgy? Or does it (C) have a specific function?

The answer of course is C. It has a specific function. It’s meant to establish a relationship between the leader of the service and the congregation, such that we *become one in the body of Christ*. That’s why, throughout the service, there is this constant back and forth. The greeting and its response bring us as an assembly into union, into relationship with each other before God as our service begins.

The Kyrie, which simply means “Lord,” likewise deepens our union as the one, mystical body of Christ, when we say or sing back and forth, that God would have mercy on us.

And the Prayer of the Day? It does two things: It sums up a general theme of the day, based on the forthcoming readings. It also draws Act One to a close, and sets the exciting stage for the next part of our service, which is the Word: Act Two.

And the Word is the second act of our four-part play.

We trust that God speaks to us when we hear the reading of God’s Word, that is, the Bible. The Bible does us no good if it sits on a bookshelf and stays closed, but when we

hear it, as part of a service or gathering – remember, the Apostle Paul says, “faith comes by what is heard,” – when we hear it, the *latent* Word of God in the Bible can become the *living* Word of God, when we hear it for ourselves.

Think of Psalm 23. You all know Psalm 23, right? It is most commonly read at funerals. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” It’s one thing to read this psalm as God’s promise to King David; it’s another to hear it as God’s promise to *you*. You are not alone, God says; I will accompany you through every chapter of your life, even those when the shadow of death looms large.

It’s what I think about when I receive Communion. I’ve been receiving Communion since I was a teenager (and that was at least 10 years ago!). It’s continuity. “I will accompany you,” God says, “through every chapter of your life, even those when the shadow of death looms large.” As the Psalm illustrates, both Testaments, Old and New, contain this latent Word of God, this good news, but it only becomes a *living word* when we hear it and believe it for ourselves.

That’s why we read from both Testaments during the worship service. And that’s why I preach on writings from both Testaments in my sermons. The message of God’s grace and mercy appears as much in Jeremiah and Isaiah, as it does Matthew, Mark, Luke or John.

But here, we have a problem. (I wish we could kind of blow up this [pulpit] so that I could walk back and forth, because I’m getting really excited. And it’s not the coffee – I only had half a cup – must be the Spirit; So, let’s keep going): What happens if I *fail* to preach the Gospel, God forbid? What happens if I fail to preach the good news from Scripture? That God claims you? That God embraces you? That God accepts you? That God frees you? That God accompanies you, that God walks with you and that God loves you?... What happens if I fail to preach that message, a message I’ve been called to preach here at Queen Anne Lutheran? What happens if, in the silence that deliberately follows the end of the sermon, you remain totally unmoved, either by me, or by the Spirit, or by both?

Well, thanks be to God for the Hymn of the Day. Cantor Kyle and I choose the Hymn of the Day intentionally. Here’s why: The Hymn of the Day (and now I’m quoting from a website of another Lutheran Church) “further drives home the point of the sermon, because even if the pastor fails, God forbid, at proclaiming the Word of God, the Gospel can still be proclaimed through the hymn.” *That’s* why its words are so important. The lyrics matter. Pay attention to them. They have been selected, not only because they reflect the theme of the day; they have been selected because at any moment, a line from a hymn can *become* the Word of God when it speaks to you, when it meets you *right where you are*. Have you ever had that experience, when the Word meets you right where you are? That’s the power of the Living Word! It can reach us through speech, yes, but it can also reach us through song, which is why music is such an important part of this Gospel-centered Lutheran tradition.

After the Hymn of the Day, our focus on the word continues with the Creed. The “Creed” is often mistranslated. It means “I give my heart to something.” Not that I assent intellectually, but “I give my heart to something” – here, to the conviction that a loving relationship lies at the heart and ground of all reality.

But there’s a difference between our two Creeds, as you may know. My confirmation students, two of whom are with us today, might have said “Of course there are; one’s shorter and one’s longer!” They went way beyond that though, and what I’m about to share they’ll probably remember from our classes. The *Apostles Creed* focuses on the *humanity* of Jesus. In it, we affirm that he lived, suffered, and he died, all during the time of Pontius Pilate, when he ruled over Judea. Why does it do this? Because opponents of the church were denying Jesus’s humanity throughout the second century, when the *Apostles Creed* was written. So the Church says, no, he lived. He lived during the time of Pontius Pilate; he was born, he suffered, and he died.

Now, by the fourth century, things had changed. Instead of denying the humanity of Jesus, opponents of the church denied his *divinity*. Hence the appearance of the *Nicene Creed*, and its language about Christ is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.”

Our focus on the Word concludes with the Intercessory Prayers, which we get from a denominational resource. I like to modify these prayers theologically; I like to make them more poetic, and to personalize them in ways that fit our congregation. And in some cases, indeed, many, like today, the Assisting Minister will do the same, which is great. Jenny caught one of my spelling errors which could have led to a very significant meaning that was different than what I intended... Worship, in short, should be a group effort, back and forth, working together, not just a one-person show.

After the prayers, we turn to the third of our four-act play, the Meal. Now, I know this seems like it’s going to go on another 15 minutes; it’s actually going to be really short, so hold on: the Meal.

And let me be clear, while Lutherans rightly agree with Catholics that Christ is *present* in the bread and the wine of Communion, we do not practice *Transubstantiation*. We do not practice Transubstantiation. “Transubstantiation” means change of substance, *trans*=change, *substantiation*=substance: “change of substance” or essence, the innermost reality of something. When a Catholic priest repeats the words of Christ at the Lord’s Supper, the teaching goes, he lifts up the bread and the wine and at that point they *become*, according to their invisible essence, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, even though their outward appearance remains the same. Now, what I just did there was summarize a theory that Thomas Aquinas put forth as a leading Catholic theologian of the Middle Ages.

Luther rejected it. But it wasn’t the Christ wasn’t present for Luther; it’s that it doesn’t require our understanding; it requires *faith*. Luther explains, therefore, the presence of Christ a bit differently. “How can the bread and wine become the body and blood of

Christ?" he asks, "if God in Christ already fills all things?" Ephesians 4 is his basis. Before Christ *ascended*, it says, Christ first *descended* into the lower parts of the earth, which is a symbolic way of saying His presence now *infuses all of creation*.

Now, if you want to be really unpopular at a party, you can talk about this using technical words. This is called *panchristicism* – the ubiquitous presence of Christ.

Luther says, "Heaven and Earth are Christ's sack; as wheat fills the sack, so He fills all things." So He fills all things. That said, you won't find Him in a cup of soup or a bowl of Wheaties. (Maybe in Rice Chex...) You will find Him where He promises to find *you*: in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. There you lay hold of Christ in a special way, in a truly personal way.

This is why I say your name when I distribute sacrament at the railing. The sacrament is that one place during the week where you can experience pure acceptance, however fleetingly. Here you *do* nothing. Here you *say* nothing. Here you kneel, stand or sit still. And then you simply put out your hands and receive the food of forgiveness.

In these instances, something, sometimes, happens. There can be a transformation. But it's not the *bread and wine* that are transformed at their core, in the body and blood of Christ; the transformation occurs in *you*, in *your* consciousness, in the way you approach the sacrament, when you trust and expect to receive Christ, in, with, and under the bread, where He has been promised.

Yes, Christ is everywhere, like television or radio waves. But he comes to you in a special way, the way these waves find their location in a TV set or a radio. He comes to you in a special way where he promises to be, namely in the wine of communion, and the waters of baptism.

But wait. We still profess to "eat his body and drink his blood." Does that make us cannibals? I'd love to give a sermon on how it does; how Lutherans have been cannibals for 500 years. That would be *really* scary – actually worse than Ethan's ninja costume in terms of fright.

I don't want to do that. Of course we're not cannibals! But why? Because, as the explanation of the great Thanksgiving in your bulletin indicates, we receive his *glorified* body. Christ could not be present everywhere, according to the human body he had before he died, obviously. But his *glorified* body, his *spiritual* body, now fills all things, like wheat in a sack. That's why we receive Communion.

The Post-Communion Prayer follows, in an effort to summarize the whole experience. Now that we have been assured and strengthened through the sacrament, we should rejoice at the end of Act Three: Christ has set us free.

The fourth and final act of our service is "The Sending." Here you are blessed as you go upon your journey. And here you are invited not to sin boldly, only, but to sing boldly, as a response to what you have received, which explains why Cantor Kyle, the Bruce Springsteen of all organists, pumps up the volume for the Sending Hymn and

the Postlude, something we hear on Reformation Sunday with emphasis, thanks to him, our choir, our guest musicians etc.

We are loved and embraced by the Holy One through Christ. Let us go forth and share that love with others. Let us listen when others won't; forgive as we have been forgiven. Let us refrain from judgment, and love our enemies, for we can do all things through the one who strengthens us. And let us be reconciled to our neighbor, something we practiced before, and now, after the pandemic, in the sharing of the peace.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

Hold up. Wait a minute. Somethin' ain't right. We've got to say a little more... (This is what I call "the Oversight!")

What if the four-part play we just described was actually a rehearsal for the life we are called to lead in the world? And if you come away with from today's message with that in mind, you've got exactly what I'm talking about. *This is a rehearsal for life in the world.* That would answer the question I asked at the beginning: Why does worship matter? It matters because it can inform how we live in the world as Christians. It might even help us change it for the better. To get better, therefore, we have to keep practicing, which is why I expect to see you each of you here, of course, next Sunday. We always have room to grow.

Amen.

Hold on. Wait a minute. Somethin' ain't right...

The Epilogue:

At the beginning, I told you I chose this sermon for two reasons. The first was Joan Kavanaugh's comment, which I really appreciated, that this is something we need to be reminded of, when it comes to our life together, our worship life together, as Christians.

The second is my mom. Most of you know my mom died in January of this past year. And next week, with some of you, my heart will be very heavy on All Saints Day. This was the last sermon I ever read to my mom. About four weeks before she died, she asked me, she was in bed and she couldn't move. I said, "Mom, what can I do for you?" And she said, "Go get one of your sermons. I want to hear one more." And so I read her this sermon, and at the end of it, she gave me the kind of love that you can only get from a truly loving parent, and that was her smile, and the words "I'm so proud of you." I love my mom, I miss her, as many of you love the deceased in your lives. I thank my mom for inspiring me to preach sermons like these.

In Jesus' name, Amen.