

“Why Church? To Learn What We Lost”

Reading: Mark 12:28-34; Hebrews 9:1-14

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It shouldn't come as a huge surprise to you that there are some things we have to learn. We have to learn how to add and subtract, we have to learn how to read, and of course there are many, many other things about the world we have to learn as well. We aren't born knowing much. In fact there are things we're made for that we still have to learn how to do; we also have to learn about ourselves. Take my daughter Junia for instance: she has two legs, and she loves to wiggle them in the air, and she's fascinated whenever she catches a glimpse of her feet. But legs aren't made for wiggling or watching, they're made for walking. I remind her of that fact quite regularly when I sing her the song by Terry Gilliam that says, "I've got two legs from my hips to the ground, and when I move 'em they walk around, and when I lift 'em they climb the stairs, and when I shave 'em they ain't got hairs." But Junia hasn't gotten to the parts about walking or climbing or certainly shaving. Her legs are made for walking, but she has to learn it, and yes, I know that she'll learn it soon enough and be using those legs to get into all sorts of trouble.

And this is why life in the church is so needed. Not because the church literally teaches you to walk, but because there are things you were made to do that you need to learn, because you've forgotten it, or you never knew it in the first place because it was lost many generations ago. We're born with legs, but we just wiggle them in the air without learning to walk. We're born with a need for spiritual expression, but it's marred by our separation from God, and we don't know what to do with it. We try all kinds of things — we use those spiritual legs for wiggling and we stare at them and we chew on our toes, but even with all our experimenting we just can't quite figure out what they're for. We have to learn to walk. Or, to take it out of the metaphor and say what we really mean, we have to learn how to worship, and the church is where we learn.

Our question in recent weeks has been, "Why church?" We're spending this time in the book of Hebrews, a very difficult book to study because it relies so heavily on images and characters from the Old Testament that are very far-removed from us even if we know their stories, and so it's not easy to know how to make sense out of the book. But it seems as though the author is writing to convince a group of Christians who are facing persecution that they should remain faithful to Jesus in spite of what they're facing, rather than turning back to some of their old ways of doing things. So, in a sense, part of the point of the book is to answer for them that question: here's *why church*, because of who Jesus is and what He's done. The specific arguments the author uses are hard for us to apply to our time, but the basic points along the way apply perfectly. Why church? Because Jesus lifts our eyes up, and because the church tells us the truth about ourselves and our world, that we're broken but there's hope, and that's a message you won't find elsewhere. And today, as we continue following this image of Jesus as the high priest that Hebrews has been using for a while now, we focus on this element of worship, this action that is so critical to the church, that is so centered on Jesus and fulfilled by Him.

Now, to be frank, talking about worship sounds pretty, well, *churchy*. If part of our goal is to be able to explain to others why being a part of the church is worth our time, shouldn't we at least try to use reasons that people might actually care about? Worship is what the church does, but if you're outside the church and have no interest in being a part of the church, worship isn't something you

spend much time thinking about or caring about. Learning to worship isn't a desire most people have, you might say, so it's not really much of an argument for *why church*.

But one of the core messages we proclaim is that our souls were created to be near God, and we have that desire to encounter God deep within us. Like we learned when we began this series, our eyes were made to look up, to elevate our gaze to something that is greater than we are, and if we don't find God, we'll probably settle for something less. The word "worship" might normally only be used in the church, but the concept is certainly something that is present in the rest of the world. Not only do we lift our eyes toward something we feel is greater than we are, we then go on to find some way of connecting with that thing. It may be through meditation, it may be through sexual relationships with others, it may be through drugs, it may be through a sense of accomplishment and success, it may be through going to a concert — whatever method we choose, we're very likely in our lives to try to find some way of making use of those legs, even if we can't really figure out what they're for.

Normally, any sort of encounter with God is likely to result in one of two responses: either worship or rebellion. Either we will want to know this God better and we will bow the knee before Him, and our voices will be consumed with praises to Him, or we will reject His authority over us, we will rebel, and our voices will be wasted praising something else. But because we're born not knowing God, and because we're born into a world full of people who have rejected Him, we have to learn how to worship. I'm very deliberate in saying that the church teaches us how to worship, because we have to learn. We're born worshippers who don't know how to worship. We're born worshippers without a liturgy to follow, without a language for worship, without a sacred space for worshipping in, and worst of all, we're born worshippers without someone to worship. We try our best to muddle through; we try so many alternatives, but we have to be taught.

Our passage from Hebrews goes into some detail about what worship looked like at one time. It talks about the Tabernacle, an ornate tent that God's people moved with them as they wandered in the wilderness in the generation after they were set free from slavery in Egypt. During those wanderings, God gave them very specific instructions for what their worship was to look like, and our reading in Hebrews talks about a few of those details. These people probably had some sort of worship they grew up with while they were living as slaves in Egypt. We don't know what they did, but Egypt had all sorts of gods and very complicated rituals and beliefs, and there are hints in the Bible that the Israelites picked up on at least some of those. Or there were plenty of other options to choose from. So as God gives them instructions for how to be His people, there are some elements of their worship that would have been familiar, ways of worshipping that they would have already known something about from their experimentation, but some of what God told them was new and unique to serving Him. So God was taking the language and forms of worship they already knew and recasting them into something that would be fit for Him. The form of worship wasn't what mattered — not the style of music or the order of the service or the style of the preaching — what mattered was that they were using their voices and their lives in loyalty to God.

The result, or at least the intended result, was that worship would become more than just something they did at certain set times, it would be something that pervaded their entire lives. It wouldn't be a program for them to follow because they had to, it would be the natural response of living in the presence of God. Their whole lives would be centered on worshipping God, and every act

would be marked by His presence. Worship was not just singing songs or offering sacrifices, it was also shown in how you dressed, how you ate, how you conducted your business life, how you organized your justice system, how you farmed the land, and how you organized your time. If we look closely at the story of the burning bush, back when God first appeared to Moses to give him his commission to go and lead God's people out of slavery, what does God give Moses as the sign by which Moses will know that God has accomplished all of this? Is it through the miraculous plagues that came upon Egypt; the unnatural darkness and water turning to blood and so on? Is it through the parting of the sea as a means of escape for God's people? Is it through the theophany of fire and thunder appearing on the mountaintop? No, God says that Moses will know that God has done this when the people are out of Egypt and are *worshipping* God at this mountain. The act of worship is the sign of God's deliverance. Later on in their history, when God's people have broken their covenant, what's the worst thing that can happen to them, the thing they lament most? That the temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed, that they are no longer living with God in their midst for them to worship. Worship saturated their entire lives.

Our text in Hebrews takes it to the next step, though. All of that worship, as important as it was, was only a foreshadowing of the worship that would be ushered in through the work of Jesus. All of that worship was limited in some way. Jesus is God With Us, God in human flesh, and because He came to be among us and gave Himself for us, He opened the way for us to have communion with God in a way that the tabernacle never could. "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" Worship is the natural result of being in the presence of God, and the holiness of Christ cleanses us and makes us ready to commune with God.

It is in the church that this worship is cultivated and passed down from generation to generation. The church is where we learn what this worship looks like. It is the gathered, worshipping people of God, telling the stories and singing the songs and reading the Scriptures and proclaiming the good news, that teaches us how to use these legs we were given. Obviously the church hasn't always done well with this, and obviously there are many ways to worship. But while our worship does often make use of some of the forms that we're used to from the outside world — many hymns, for example, use popular bar tunes as their music — the actual content of worship and the goal of worship are alien to the fallen world. It has to be learned.

I'm always kind of confused when I see churches that deliberately model their Sunday morning worship service around a rock concert, thinking that they need to have "relevant" worship to attract people to church. But in reality, worship is by definition *not* relevant. Rock concerts, great though they can be, are only an attempt at filling the deep need for connection with God; why would you model the reality of worship on the imitation of a concert? When we worship, we are bringing our lives into alignment with the other-worldly reality of God's kingdom. We are proclaiming with our voices and our lives that Jesus is Lord. We are joining in with the redeemed community of believers, our brothers and sisters in Christ, both alive and dead, in singing eternal praises to God. That's why worship can take on so many appearances, and why there are so many types of songs, and why we're deliberate in trying to involve a variety of worship styles: because we are teaching one another how to speak the language of heaven.

Why church? Because here, in the fellowship of one another, doing the things of the church, singing the church's songs both old and new, reading the favorite words of the church, we are learning how to live lives that are saturated with worship. Your life can be an act of worship to God. More than just what we do for an hour or so on Sunday mornings, your every action can be something that brings glory to God and reveals the presence of God to the world. Is there an area of your life you're holding back from worshipping God with? Are your words, your actions, your relationships, your work, all tuned to sing of God's grace?



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