

This week and next, the setting for our Gospel readings is what we call Holy Week. Jesus is in Jerusalem, and these will be his final days. He has boldly stormed through the temple marketplace, calling it a den of thieves. He has wisely answered questions about paying taxes and responded to confrontations from religious leaders. Not only could he quote verses from the law and prophets back to them, but he knew the spirit of those Scriptures. Now, in what Mark will tell us is the last question anyone dared ask Jesus, a scribe approaches.

This man has been listening to Jesus in his encounters with others. Given he is identified as a scribe, a member of the religious establishment, one expects another confrontation, but we soon discover the dynamic between this man and Jesus is different. A unity will be formed as the two discuss the first, the most important, the greatest commandment: to love God. While Jesus and the scribe may differ on issues of purity, sin, or even whether heaven exists, the two find common ground in the Shema of Israel – the love of one God, with one's whole being. And while only asked what is the first commandment, Jesus does not hesitate to link a second one to the first. Let us hear God's word to us in Mark 12:28-34.

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard Jesus and the Sadducees disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³²Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Some of you may have had mothers who sang hymns or gospel songs as they did the dishes or cleaned the house or sewed; and, yes, I know linking mothers with those tasks sounds sexist, but they were things our mother did in the 1950's. Our mother was not a singer, though she made sure we experienced the symphony and classical music. Neither did we have a father who sang songs from his favorite musicals while in the shower or repairing the house, but we had a turntable, and "West Side Story" and "Carousel" shared space with Gilbert and Sullivan on the shelf of LP records. We were not a singing household, though music was valued.

I learned to sing in church. First, there was the younger children's chorus gathered at holiday times, with red robes and white surpluses who everyone adored. But this was followed by the weekly discipline of Thursday afternoon rehearsals and Sunday processions of the junior choir, which continued into junior high, or until one's voice changed, whichever came first. So, in essence, I learned to sing in the setting of worship, and I am grateful to have grown up in, professed my faith in, and eventually been ordained to ministry in a church that to this day values its ministry of music, particularly in its worship life, which has expanded to now include a Ghanaian Gospel choir.

Psalm 146, which we read responsively, invites us into a setting of music and worship. As with the four psalms that follow it to close out the psalter, Psalm 146 is called an Alleluia psalm, beginning with the command to "Praise the Lord!" Praise of God is to be the focus of our lives, in both our formal worship and throughout our daily living.

Praise the Lord! Not just with voice, though songs will spring forth from our lips. Praise the Lord! Not just with body, though our legs will long to leap in dance. The psalmist is clear, praise of God is from "our whole being, all our life, our entire soul."

One writer called praise of God our "vocation" as people of faith and wrote, "Praise of God is a fundamental commitment of life, no less essential to the faith than oxygen is to the lungs." [*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 249] Those schooled in the Westminster Catechism of faith recall the first question is, "What is the chief end of man [and woman]? The answer is, "...to glorify God and enjoy God forever." The core of our faith commitment, what we might call our work each day, is centered on praise of God.

We praise God in a variety of daily ways. We praise God by the way we live within our families and at work or school. We praise God when we marvel at sunrises or sunsets, full moons, or a hike in nature. We praise God when we are silent and open our hearts and minds to the Spirit's voice. We praise God when we respond to the needs of others, send a card of sympathy or encouragement, make a visit to the lonely, or reconcile with one with whom we have been estranged. You can add your own ways of praising God with daily living, small kindnesses and a continual litany of thanksgivings, even for such seemingly minor things as hot water in the shower.

Some contend all these ways of praising God are types of worship experiences; perhaps so, but for me, worship is distinct. While we can praise God alone, I believe worship occurs in community. When we worship God, we are gathered for communal praise, in a special place. The place is often called a sanctuary, but it can be a gothic cathedral or a country church; a school auditorium or an open field in Kenya; an underground room in a country where worship is banned or a chapel on a naval cruiser; a cemetery or park for Easter sunrise or a storefront along a city street or in a suburban strip mall. While the sanctuary may look different, what is the same is God's people gathered for worship, whether the number is in the thousands or just a handful.

When I say God's people gathered for worship, it is wise to remember Christ called the church into being. We may believe we each of us chose to be in this place at this time, but I would invite us to think instead of our being here because God's Spirit gathered us. If I have not convinced you, then simply look around a minute and ask yourself where else you would gather with such a rag tag group of people. I often think as I look out over a congregation, if it is God who has gathered this diverse thinking group of people together for worship, God must have a wonderful sense of humor. I mean who else but God could have house sitting in the same sanctuary, perhaps even the same pew, with someone you believe consistently votes the wrong way in political elections, or whose theology and beliefs are far more liberal or conservative than yours. God has gathered us, and not by accident.

I particularly remember this when we celebrate Communion. Differences of politics or theology, class or gender, lifestyle or need, are set aside as we figuratively pull our chairs up to this table for a meal. Christ has invited each one of us. The invitations were not mailed by accident. Rich and poor and middle class, Republicans and Democrats and Independents, theological liberals and conservatives and middle of the roaders all come together as Jesus sisters and brothers in our Communion. God has not only a sense of humor, but a sense of wholeness and unity.

As I suggested earlier, it is likely the scribe and Jesus did not see eye to eye on issues of religion and faith. Scribes were keepers of the status quo in terms of theology and ritual. Jesus taught the status quo was a stumbling block to faith if it kept people in poverty, or excluded them from full inclusion in worship, or gave them unequal status in culture. It is likely the scribe will not give up being a scribe, though in the contentious atmosphere of the day, one can imagine he will take grief from the hardcore base of his religious party for even speaking with Jesus in a civil tone.

Jesus and the scribe came together in a common understanding of the oneness of God. They affirm with each other the heart of monotheistic faith, which we share with both Jews and Muslims, is that our vocation, our prime purpose, our chief end in life is *to love God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength.*

I find this first commandment to be at the heart of gatherings of worship. In worship, we come together to praise God in a communal affirmation of individuals who seek to love God with all their hearts, souls, minds and strengths.

But let me pause here for, as they say, a word from our sponsor.

In most churches, a major portion of the annual budget is committed to ministries of worship and music. This is not revealed in a budget's actual line items that includes only such things as purchasing sheet music or elements for communion, but when one includes staff time and building use, worship and music ministries are often the largest ministry expense in the life of a congregation. Thus, when we make our pledges for 2016 next month, let us rejoice a good portion of those dollars will be committed to the vitality of worship and music, those times we come together to praise God.

Now, back to our sermon, already in progress.

In worship, we exhibit our love and praise of God as a community of faith. Yet, worship extends us beyond our communal gatherings. The psalmist's call to sing is not to be confined to this space alone. When worship ends, God's Spirit ushers us back into the world with our song, calling to live out Jesus' second commandment, *to love our neighbor as ourself*.

I have heard many people express how worship strengthens them to make it through their week. If that is true, I believe Jesus' second commandment also calls us to strengthen our neighbors to make it through their weeks, knowing for Jesus, neighbors are not just the folks on our block or the members of our church. Worship extends our love and praise outward as we seek to walk the walk with our God, who the psalmist declares will give justice to the oppressed and bread to the starving, protect immigrants and help orphans and widows.

Our love of neighbor as ourselves is manifest within our congregation through the work of the deacons and the fellowship and care of our shepherding team ministries. We couple this with our mission team ministries to extend Christ's love and care beyond our walls to encompass those who may be strangers by name, but become neighbors by need.

Our giving to the church is evidence of our faith that God is still at work in the world, and still calling us to sing God's song over the tumults of war, the distresses of poverty, and the cries of the suffering. Our pledges and offerings enable us to both sing God's song in worship and extend God's song beyond these walls, so it echoes from our sanctuary into the deep recesses of the world's despair.

The church taught me to sing, but even more my faith was nurtured in a community that taught me a song. I have learned more songs over the years. On this All Saint's Sunday, when we particularly remember the saints above who have passed from this life, we are encouraged to recall the nurturing individuals and churches of our own faith journeys, those who taught us songs to sing in our daily work of praising God.

As a congregation, let us also remember we are in a very real sense a vocational academy, equipping the saints, old and young alike, in how we can best praise God in worship and glorify God in our care for our neighbor.