

*The Maintenance of
Divine Worship*

*Summer Series on the
Great Ends of the Church*

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Psalm 146

¹Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! ²I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

³Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. ⁵Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God,

⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; ⁷who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; ⁸the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. ⁹The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. ¹⁰The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

1 Chronicles 16:23-34

²³Sing to the LORD, all the earth. Tell of his salvation from day to day. ²⁴Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. ²⁵For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods. ²⁶For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. ²⁷Honor and majesty are before him; strength and joy are in his place. ²⁸Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. ²⁹Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come before him. Worship the LORD in holy splendor; ³⁰tremble before him, all the earth. The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. ³¹Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice, and let them say among the nations, "The LORD is king!" ³²Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it. ³³Then shall the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. ³⁴O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, you have a reputation for worship. After the congregational vote in May when I officially received a call, I began to tell friends, colleagues, and mentors about my exciting news. Bryn Mawr, they'd say. "Have you heard their worship?" "Their music is beautiful." In my three short weeks as your new Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care and Senior Adults I can confirm that the rumors were true. The opportunity to participate in worship alongside each of you, to lift our voices up to God, to hear the leading of the choir, and feel the movement of the Spirit, has been a joy. It is truly a gift to serve as one of your Associate Pastors and to worship alongside each of you.

Worship of the divine is one of the six great ends of the Church. Specifically, the church is called to the end of, "The maintenance of divine worship." Throughout Scripture, the people of God are identified as a worshipful people. The Israelites worship God as they journey through the desert, much like our little ones did during Vacation Bible Camp two weeks ago. The judges and kings follow God's call to set up places of worship, including the Temple in Jerusalem. The most famous of these worshipful characters is David, Israel's great King, and humanity's great colleague. In David we get a glimpse of the heights and depths of what humans are capable of, from being called the man after God's own heart to committing murder and adultery. Human beings, those called to worship the Lord most high, you and me, we are holy and broken all at once.

This morning's scripture text comes from David's lips: "Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Tell of his salvation from day to day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples. For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be revered above all gods." By placing these words on the lips of David, the author of Chronicles accomplishes two things. First, it gives the present worship ceremony that's taking place in the book the sacred authority of the past. At this period in history, it was believed that the older something was, the more true it must be. The existence of something old was testament to God's approval of it. Putting these words on David's lips meant that it

was at least five hundred years old and should be regarded as holy. Second, it affirms the ancient tradition of David as hymnist and liturgist. David, the great king and founder of Israel's faith, is also the one who teaches Israel, and now teaches us, how to worship. The words used for divine worship stretch back millennia, uniting us today with our ancestors in the Middle East. They are holy words, as worship is a holy action, giving glory and unadulterated praise to God, our creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Yet, as anyone who has tried knows, it is a struggle to maintain holy worshipful lives. Life is already full of things we must maintain: driving kids to school and practice, going to doctor's appointment after doctor's appointment, trying to heal your marriage or keep your house. Can we add one more thing? The maintenance of divine worship is not easily sustained, whether individually or communally.

This past December, on a Sunday much like this one, I sat up in the chancel of an affluent church in New York City's Upper East Side and listened to the Children's message. The scripture passage for that day was the story of John the Baptist and the pastor was asking the children what they knew about this man from the New Testament. "Who was John the Baptist?" the pastor asked. "The cousin of Jesus," quipped an older fourth-grader. "That's right," replied the pastor, and what was his role, she inquired. A second grader spoke up, "he was a prophet," she said. "Yes, he was, and what is a prophet?" the pastor replied. This time one of the younger children spoke up, "a profit is when you sell something for more money than you bought it for," he said. This rather stoic congregation could not contain their laughter, at which point the pastor replied, "yes, that is a 'profit,' but that's a P-R-O-F-I-T 'profit,' I'm thinking of a P-R-O-P-H-E-T 'prophet.'"

We can certainly relate to this child, can't we? I know I can. Living life anticipating a financial profit, not a biblical one. Are we not all subject to trading the things of God for the things of this world from time to time, even right in the middle of a worship service? It's not because we're bad people. We have children and families and

commitments. We even have commitments that we believe have come from God. It's a short shift from worshipping the divine to worshipping our own concerns. Maintenance directs our praises back to God, and God alone. Yet, maintenance is easier when we are in control, when we can make changes right here and now. Maintenance is more complicated when it's with the divine, because God doesn't want our work in spurts, doesn't want five minutes here and there. No God wants us for the long haul. God desires our undivided attention. That is the kind of worship that God approves and that we must maintain. Which brings us to our psalm reading for today:

Psalm 146 is the first of the five Hallelujah Psalms which conclude the psalter. They're titled "Hallelujah psalms:" because they begin with the Hebrew word, "Hallelujah," translated, "Praise the Lord." The Lord we are to praise is not mortal, says the psalmist. No, the Lord will not perish, but rather the Lord is the one who oversaw creation, who brought into being all that is. This God executes justice for the oppressed; gives food to the hungry; sets the prisoners free; loves the righteous, cares for the strangers, the orphans and the widows." This God, our God, cares about people, cares about you and me. The psalmist concludes, "The Lord will reign forever, for all generations. Praise the Lord." Hallelujah.

That last part is the best news of all. The Lord will reign forever, therefore, let us praise the Lord. It is not our praising the Lord that ensures God reigns forever. The maintenance of divine worship does not mean that we must maintain worship in order for God to reign. No, it's actually the opposite. We maintain worship of God because God reigns.

Therefore, to worship God is to carry out what God does. Author Anne Lamott provides a good barometer to ensure our worship and actions are geared towards the one true God. She wrote, "You know you have created God in your own image when it turns out God hates all the same people you do."¹ To avoid running into the rut of worshipping a

¹ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), 22.

God who is for us and only *for us* we must always come back to scripture and ask questions of ourselves and our community. When we cry out in worship, Hallelujah, praise the Lord, are we longing for the God who cares for the stranger and the widow? Are we striving after the God who is clothed in splendor and majesty, strength and joy? Does our worship give praise to the God who became flesh and walked among us, who showed us what love incarnate looked like? We carry out the maintenance of divine worship through song and Word, by executing justice and caring for the stranger and the orphan. We carry out the maintenance of divine worship by loving God, and by loving our neighbor.

Some of you know a bit about my career before becoming a pastor. I've mentioned in a few conversations that I used to work for a nonprofit in Haiti. One time while I was there I found myself walking up the long hill that led to one of the schools we ran. It was early morning and I was just beginning my ascent when Ms. Blanc, a mother of a student at the school ran up to meet me. "Mr. Ballard, Mr. Ballard," she said in broken English, "will you join us for dinner?" Typically this was something I turned down, afraid it would appear I showed favorites to one family over another, so I attempted to decline. She insisted, "please, we'd really love to have you." "Ok," I said, "I'd love to join you for dinner." Later that evening, as I came down the hill from the school, Ms. Blanc was outside waiting for me. She washed my hands and led me to their side yard where her husband and two children sat waiting. Will you pray, she said, looking to me. We held hands and I offered a prayer in a mixture of English and Creole, thanking God for our meal, for unexpected friendships, and for the gift of hospitality. Then we ate. Plates of fried plantains and chicken mixed into rice and beans abounded. Our chairs carved marks in the hard dirt earth as we drank Cremas and exchanged stories under the night sky. As our time together came to an end I began to feel guilty. This meal was extravagant, delicious. It was more than I knew they could afford, more than they usually ate in a week. Ms. Blanc's two young sons took my plate over to a wash bucket and began to clean as Ms. Blanc thanked me again for coming. I was about to say

something, to offer some funds, or to apologize, when her husband spoke up, seemingly expecting my words. “You have made something of our kids,” he said. “They would not have an education if it were not for you and your team. They will have a life I could not give them.” I rushed to form a rebuttal, to tell him this was not true, it was their family’s dedication, their love and guidance and support that was shaping their sons. It was not me. Ms. Blanc spoke again, “this is who we are. We love you. Thank you.”

I don't tell this story because I think I have done something great; I tell this story because there is power in identity. Lawyer and activist Bryan Stevenson said, “When we create the right kind of identity, we can say things to the world around us that they don't actually believe makes sense. We can get them to do things that they don't think they can do.”²

Ms. Blanc’s identity allowed her to radiate generosity and love in the midst of material scarcity and violence. It didn’t make sense, but it made me believe such generosity is possible anywhere. When we create an identity centered upon the maintenance of divine worship then we can say things to the world around us that they don’t actually believe makes sense. We can get them to do things they don’t think possible.

We can talk about a world where people of different nationalities and faiths can live in harmony. We can get people to believe it’s possible for widows and children to be cared for, for disease to be no more, and for heartache to end. We can talk about a community where neighbor loves neighbor, and traditional lines of division are extinguished. We can get people to believe that a new world is possible, a world dominated by the lamb, not the sword. We can talk about a new vocabulary of faith, where prophet, P-R-O-P-H-E-T, is just as familiar as profit, P-R-O-F-I-T. We can get people to worship the divine each and

² Bryan Stevenson, "We Need to Talk about an Injustice," TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, March 1, 2012, , https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice

every day, and thereby bring the kingdom of God to earth just as it is in heaven.

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, you whose worship is so beautiful, I set before you now the same invitation the writer of Chronicles offered to his audience. “Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Tell of his salvation from day to day.” In so doing may we cultivate identities rooted in God’s steadfast love, which endures forever. Hallelujah, praise the Lord. Amen.