

Worship

Ephesians 5:15-21, Luke 4:16-21

Center Church, Hartford

March 8, 2020

The Rev. Dr. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

Here's what the members of Nazareth Synagogue thought would happen. Visiting celebrity Jesus would read scripture and say a few words. Everyone would comment on how well he spoke and how smart he was. They would remember his father Joseph fondly. They would shake hands with him on the way out and say how nice it was that he visited.

They had come to worship. To hear the familiar scriptures read. To sing together the same prayers lifted to God for many years. To visit with friends and family.

You know, like we do.

It started well. He stood up and read a very moving section of Isaiah, and read it really effectively ("gracious words," they said). Then he said something a bit odd, about this having been fulfilled in their hearing. ("What was that? He's Joseph's son, right, not the prophet Isaiah, LOL!").

If we read on in Luke's telling of this story, that's when things began to get wonky. Jesus figured out that they weren't really listening to him or they would have been much more either a. excited by his prediction that he had been anointed to bring good news, release, etc. or b. angry that he was presuming to say God had anointed **him** as the "chosen one."

Neither had happened, so Jesus pushed even more. He said, "now some of you may have heard I've done some healing in other towns, and you're wondering when I'm going to get out my miracle working kit here in my hometown. But I don't think you see me as anything more than that little boy who ran around here making trouble. Let me explain. God is doing something radically new, and if you can't hear it and don't want to participate in it, I'll go to other people who do, just as the prophets Elijah and Elisha did generations ago."

Now that made the Nazareth folk mad. He wasn't supposed to say stuff like that in worship. He wasn't supposed to break traditions.

So, they did to him what faith communities have done to too many prophets and clergy for millennia: they threw him out. In fact, apparently, some of them grabbed him by the arms and tried to throw him off a cliff so he wouldn't come back, but cooler heads prevailed and they let him just walk away.

Hold that for a minute.

For the next three weeks, I am going to be exploring the two mission priorities we developed in 2019 in a retreat, then voted on at our Annual Meeting a year ago. These priorities are meant to shape our lives together. This week, I turn to Worship. Here's what's interesting in context of this story. For the part of the retreat the Vision Team called "Big Ideas," we came up with five general areas which grew out of our first retreat considering the purpose of church, and we asked small groups to come up with a "Big Idea" in that area. Two of those areas ended up with worship-related ideas, one of which got the second most votes at our Annual Meeting as a mission priority going forward.

The area was named "Deepening Our Connections as a Community of Faith." The "Big Idea" was "Explore a Different Culture of Worship."

It was at the time, and is now, so interesting to me that the group looking at how we might deepen our connections as a community of faith (to each other, to others, to God) focused on worship. So often people think of worship as something you do with other people, singing, saying the Lord's Prayer, listening to scripture, receiving Holy Communion, as building up, we hope, our connection with God. Individually. Connection with each other might come in a fleeting moment of passing the peace, but more after worship in conversation around food or in adult faith formation sessions.

That day in Nazareth, Jesus sought to shake people out of their complacency about worship in order to connect them more closely with God, with each other, but even more with those **God** came to connect with more closely: the poor, captives or prisoners, those who could not see, the oppressed. Then he went on to say to his Nazareth neighbors, effectively, "I didn't come primarily for you." Everywhere else he went, he invited people to follow him, to join him in a different pattern of faith

community life and worship, to, if you will, “develop a new culture of worship,” among other things. And many did. Somehow, he knew that his people in Nazareth simply weren’t ready.

Those who did follow Jesus found themselves worshipping on hillsides and on beaches and in houses, sharing food, listening to challenging and sometimes disturbing words of teaching, experiencing the rituals of healing and forgiveness, and eventually singing hymns in a garden the night before Jesus died. When he did worship in a synagogue, as, we are told here, was his custom on the Sabbath, he often got in trouble for healing at the wrong time or the wrong person or saying something disturbing. He kept trying to connect people to God, to each other, and to those around them most in need of love, healing and connection, including those generally considered less acceptable or unimportant. Like lepers, those of different religions, people in the “wrong” professions like tax collectors and prostitutes, Roman enemies, women, children. “If you seek to connect to God,” Jesus seemed to be saying, “then you need to understand that God will connect you with these kinds of people to whom I was sent.” As one theologian once wrote, “When we invite Jesus into our hearts, Jesus becomes a nuisance because he wants to bring his friends with him.” (Leonard Sweet)

Or, as Barbara Brown Taylor has written: “The issue [is] not the ritual, but the relationships.” (*Altars in the World*, p. 102)

The ritual is in service of the relationships: our relationship with God, our relationships with each other, and our relationship with those different from us, especially those Jesus said he was anointed to serve: the poor, prisoners, the disabled in body, mind or spirit, the oppressed.

Jesus did not seek to destroy all the worship traditions of his faith. He read the scriptures, and interpreted them as Jewish religious leaders had been doing for thousands of years. He prayed. He sang familiar songs after the Passover Seder with his friends. He also took the traditions in new directions, as one of his favorite phrases according to Matthew’s gospel was “You have heard that it was said, but I say to you...” Jesus was about more than developing a new culture of worship for the sake of change alone. Jesus was about developing a new culture of human interaction with one another to further the Kingdom of God, and he saw worship as a place where people could connect with God and receive strength and

guidance for a new way of living, as well as connecting with people of all kinds in prayer and song and eating and learning from one another. It wasn't happening in too many places; worship was not transforming lives. As he said to the folk in Nazareth, he often said to his disciples: "Don't just listen to yourselves and do what you want; listen to this woman getting water at a well who has something to say about worship. Listen to this tax collector Zaccheus who has something to say about compassion and justice and repentance. Listen to these children who are seeking connection just like you are but in different ways. Listen to me, because I am here not to destroy your tradition, but to disrupt your tradition for these times.

As an old hymn puts it "New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth." (Once to Every Man and Nation)

As we seek to develop a new culture of worship, I believe the question we need to ask over and over again is how our rituals are in service of relationships and connections with God, with each other, and with the folk Jesus was anointed to serve. This is exciting and disrupting and full of wonderful possibility. Don't you see? Other people who are similar to and different from us can help us discern God in our lives even as we help them discern God in theirs! As author Martha Tatonic writes, this "means you can expect that not only your little life will bear blessings for others, but also that others are going to bless you, too!" (Christian Century, 2/26/20)

But you have to be open to the fact that blessings, openings to the power and love of God, may come in ways and through people you might not have expected. We are here at worship to be blessed and to bless, to "deepen our connections as a community of faith." Let's experiment together on a new culture of worship that opens up new connections and many ways of blessing.