

“Giving Shape to Worth”
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A great favorite among the professors Jennifer and I had in seminary was a Catholic sister named Rosemary Chinnici. Occasionally, a seminary student would invite Rosemary to come along to a worship service somewhere nearby. Invariably, Rosemary would ask, “what or whom are you going to worship?” An answer like “I don’t really know” would prompt a further question like “Well, then why are you going?” An answer that instead gave a very detailed and definite sketch was likely to elicit a response from Rosemary more like, “hmmm. . . . Do you think an object of devotion you can describe with such particularity is really GRAND enough to be worth worshipping?”

We were all made uncomfortable by Sister Chinnici’s theological martial arts moves. But by blocking the exits, bless her, she was guiding the encounter toward a deeper engagement. Seeing his first answer shot down, and knowing that flight would only make him look even more foolish, the seminarian might take a second pass, trying something more halting, but, at the same time, more authentic – like “Well, it’s hard for me to say what or whom I’m worshipping, because it’s not really a what or a whom. But I think I know when I’m connected to it; and I think it’s good, because when I’m connected to it, I’M good. It’s not like this happens only in worship, but worship does seem to be a particularly favorable place for it. And in worship, I’m seeing more and more clearly what does and doesn’t connect me with this hard-to-describe something.” At this kind of answer, a broad smile would appear on Rosemary’s face, and she would say something like, “tell me more.”

Rosemary knew, and we learned, that worship is all about values. Worship derives from Anglo-Saxon words meaning worth and shape. To worship is give meaningful shape to something we sense to be worthy or valuable. Of course, we deal with values all the time. Does that mean we’re worshipping all the time? In a sense, yes. Worship, says Clarence Skinner, “is the craving for a reality which transcends our daily experience.” Every person, as Emerson once said, will worship something. Worshipping is the way humans give structure and meaning to life - - organizing it around something larger and nobler than themselves. We call these things values, and we do learn that some things make better values than others. In between the services today, we had a lifespan faith development program in which we looked at the worship of money -- at what it costs us to make it our master instead of our servant.

But we usually don’t apply the term “worship” to this everyday worth-shaping. We set this word aside for what we do in church. We do this because in church we’re concerned with what we consider to be the highest or ultimate value—something grander or loftier than the whole world and everything in it. A value that lofty is bound to be somewhat mysterious, somewhat indefinite in form.

So we need to shape this lofty, indefinite something that we sense to be profoundly good, so that we can connect with it and make our lives a goodly – or as some would say, godly -- reflection of it. We can only do this through symbolism and metaphor. We know better than to try to capture this ultimate value in a pat definition. That would be like trying to put lightning in a bottle, wouldn't it? Notice how I can't even talk about the way we talk about this ultimate value without instinctively turning to metaphor.

So instead of offering pat definitions, we talk about what this ultimate value is like, or what seems to be associated with it. We talk about how we feel in the presence of it. We say vague-sounding things like “God is love,” but then that actually moves us into a valuable conversation about what love is. We express wonder at a rare energy that flows through us now and then -- at a sense of wholeness and holiness that comes and goes, a sense of spaciousness and generosity. We give shape to this worthy something – so we can try to bring it into our daily lives.

Of course, we're supposed to be doing this in all aspects of church life -- in covenant groups, social justice work, board meetings, even in settings as mundane-sounding as finance committee meetings. And if we take our religion seriously, we're also trying to express our ultimate religious value – our sense of The Holy -- in our lives outside of church. So we still have to ask ourselves, what is it about the service we attend on Sunday morning that warrants singling it out for the honorific name “worship?”

Now, before I answer that question, instinctively I'm glancing around to make sure Sister Chinnici hasn't slipped into the sanctuary. . . . Good. The coast is clear. . . . The worship service is a rare place where we can leave behind the distractions that complicate the worth-shaping we do in everyday life – even in church life. Much of the loving care we devote to our worship service atmosphere is designed to help us do that.

The word “sacred” means “set aside,” made special. We give the name sacred to things that move us closer to The Holy. When we set aside time and resources for making a worship service special, the quality of the event is changed; but even more importantly, we are changed. Our act of sanctifying this time, this place, these rituals and observances, is a symbolic affirmation of the value we place on the life of the spirit.

So we call our place of worship a sanctuary. As that word suggests, we do take refuge here. But worship is not escapism. It partakes of otherworldly values, but it is not a space ship for making our getaway. In fact, everyday life must be brought into the sanctuary. We can't haul in all of it, of course. But we can represent the pieces of it that are most important for what we're up to in church -- through ritual, poetry, music, stories, news of one another, sacred texts, testimony about sensitive subjects . . . the provocations and consolations of a sermon.

Strange, that we would go to so much trouble to lift ourselves up out of our everyday lives by coming here, only to turn around and fashion symbols to represent what we left behind. Paradoxically, leaving everyday life behind may be an important way to be present to it. That kind of presence is difficult to engender swimming in the fast-moving current of everyday life, which is so fixated on the past and the future. All that trying to fix what has already happened;

all that trying to control what is yet to come. As religious people, we do try to bring spiritual presence into that fast-moving current, but we also need to bring the fast-moving current into worship – where we can slow it down and take a good hard look at it.

In our church life outside of Sunday morning worship, the current isn't supposed to be moving quite so fast. But like everyday life, the life of the church still needs to be given the shape of holiness in worship. The services we have done about covenant groups are examples of this.

To use a Greek word we've used here before, we are an "ecclesia" – the Greek word for a people called out of their everyday lives, to gather for an extraordinary purpose. In her book Shape Me a People, Maria Harris uses some more Greek words to describe the spiritual practices of an ecclesia.

One is kerygma, the practice of proclamation and celebration, which is central to worship. We proclaim and celebrate our continuing discovery of the goodness of being connected to the holy. Another practice is diakonia, which means to contribute or serve. The social justice message we heard from Chris this morning is an example of that. Koinonia, which means connection or community, is a third such practice. In all aspects of the life of our church, we are trying to create a community that reflects our ultimate value. The Welcoming Congregation luncheon we will have after this morning's worship is devoted to this value of community. We describe ourselves to the world beyond our walls as "a welcoming, worshiping, witnessing community." This description is a close match for the kerygma, koinonia, and diakonia of an ancient ecclesia.

Yet another spiritual practice of an ecclesia is captured in the Greek word "didache," which means teaching. In worship, we represent and actually conduct a significant part of the teaching work of our community. In Lifespan Faith Development we affirm that teaching is appropriate for adults as well as children.

On Sunday morning, we continually renew these aspects of worth-shaping by bringing them into worship. The Greek names for them remind us that celebrating and recommitting ourselves to these practices is itself a spiritual practice with a religious lineage of thousands of years. It's a way of saying yes, there are some constants in the uncertain seas of human life; yes, the fundamental things do apply as time goes by.

To decide what to represent from everyday life and church life in our worship, and how to organize it, we need a theological frame that will help us engender the strongest possible connection with The Holy. An example of such a frame is that tripartite question often used to encapsulate religion: where did we come from, why are we here, and where are we going? There are no empirical answers for these questions, of course, because they aren't empirical questions.

In worship, we're not trafficking in empiricism. Our answer to that tripartite question might provide a theological frame for Sunday morning that goes something like this. We came from a unity, in which all of the universe was an undifferentiated oneness, which then divided

itself into multiplicity – finite and infinite, mortal and divine, conscious and unconscious. To be mortal, it was essential that we come into this world forgetful of our divine origin in unity. Otherwise we couldn't really be separate from that original unity.

We are here, in this condition of multiplicity, in order to know ourselves, one another, and the given world; and in so doing, to reawaken to the unity from which we came. In that original unity, there was no knowing, because knowing requires a multiplicity – a being who knows and a being who is known. We are here to do this sacred work of knowing and being known, because until we do, the universe is incomplete. It is a task that only creatures who have the capacity of consciousness can do. That's us. We begin this task by choosing to entertain the possibility of reunion, of wholeness.

The result of this knowing is to make actual what was mere potential in the original unity from which we came – so that we can see it now in its fullness, as a unity that includes within itself the multiplicity represented in human, worldly life. It is toward this deeper and more complex unity, or wholeness, that we are trying to move in our worth-shaping.

Now, this capsule answer obviously raises more questions than it resolves. The point of it is not so much the specific content as it is to show how we need some such frame on which to arrange the symbols, metaphors, stories, and other forms of expression by which our worship can move us closer to the holy.

It does matter which forms of expression we choose and how we arrange them in worship. It's right that we sweat the details. What matters much more, though, is how we arrange ourselves. It is a matter of posture, but you don't need classes in the technique. There is no expertise involved. It is a matter of intention and willingness to be open to possibility – the possibility of a closer connection to the holy, the possibility of God, however loudly the gods of empiricism may insist that the God of spirit is improbable, fantastic, or worse. It is a matter of knocking on the door, willing to be surprised when it swings open at your touch, without needing anyone else to unlatch it from the other side and let you in.

You don't have to feel a particular way. You don't have to believe a particular way. You only have to choose to be willing. Anyone can make that choice, regardless of how she is feeling or thinking. Worship is the ultimate democracy. You can even be thinking that your own subjective willingness couldn't possibly make any difference in worship. The issue is not what are you thinking. The issue is what are you willing.

Today's readings paint two superficially different but fundamentally similar pictures of utterly ordinary people taken to an extraordinary place by their willingness to show up for worship. You can feel like you're a dead man walking, but the question still is, are you willing to be open to the possibility of resurrection – not some in magical afterlife in a heaven somewhere, but in the here and now of your own life? Not even are you open to it; just are you will-ing to be open to it.

Our ordinariness isn't bad news. It's good news. Jennifer and I don't have to be William Ellery Channing or Olympia Brown. Halleluia! Margaret doesn't have to be Sophia Lyon Fahs.

Halleluia! Our musicians don't have to be Yo Yo Ma or Itzhak Perlman. Halleluia! And all of you don't have to be the Heavenly Host, for crying out loud. Halleluia! With our Unitarian sense of specialness it's painful for us to confront the fact that we too are ordinary! Worship is the balm for that pain. More than anything else, what we need to bring to the spiritual practice called worship, in order to engender a deeper connection to the holy, is our selves. Our skills at worship arts are valuable, but our selves contain value beyond compare -- WORTH, waiting to be shaped.

Will you come as you are? Will you dare to ask others to take you as you are? Will you allow the possibility that what and who and how you are is absolutely sufficient for what we're up to on Sunday morning? Will you choose to be willing to be open to possibility?

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With this sense of what we're up to in worship, we can turn to which specific forms of expression are best in worship. But not today, because the sermon just ended. At least it better have, because the time is 12:10 p.m. Next week's worship theme is about one such form. The Greek word for it is leiturgia. It means prayer. It will be an interesting context in which to consider how best to use the various expressive forms in worship. I have an uneasy feeling that Sister Chinnici may make an appearance. For now, the only things left to say are "to be continued," and "amen."