

IMPORTANT INFORMATION: The stories, and other elements of this sermon, contain copyrighted materials. We purchase them and have permission to use them in our parish, but not outside of it. Please do not post this sermon, or the stories in it, on any social media site. That would violate our agreement and subject us to a fine

Pentecost 14, September 3, 2023

“Lost in Wonder, Love and Praise”

Read: Romans 11: 33 – 36 and or memorize Rom. 11:36

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? These are impossible questions to answer. They’re questions about which philosophers philosophize and theologians theologize and simple folk wonder, all to no avail. They are questions that boggle the mind and strain the brain. Might we call them useless questions? Maybe?

Why maybe? Why should there be any doubt? Why waste our time struggling with the unknowable, the incomprehensible and the unanswerable? At least, from a Christian viewpoint we ask, when there are questions that challenge our faith and our discipleship.

How shall we feed the poor? How does a Christian both forgive and forget? Or this question, “What shall we do with Jesus, who is called Christ?” These are the questions that ought to command our attention. These are the questions that we Christians should be pondering and considering. Right? Maybe?

There are two seemingly unanswerable questions in our verses for today: “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?” and “Or who has given a gift to God, that God should repay him?” If unanswerable questions should be ignored, why did St. Paul, an eminently practical Christian, include them in this great epistle?

He faced many hard questions. When a jailor in Philippi called out of the rubble of his prison, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul didn’t hesitate! “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” Or what about this question, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” Without hesitation, He told us that nothing could do it. And to make sure all who would ever read it, knew it, he gave us a whole list of things that he was certain cannot separate us from God’s love.

As he faced death what better words could he share with us than, “For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and the mortal nature must put on immortality Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” He wasn’t afraid of hard questions for he knew that the Holy Spirit would help Him answer. Those answers would lift hearts and change lives.

Right after concluding his brilliant theological argument to the Roman Christians that God had consigned all people to disobedience so that all people might receive His mercy, suddenly there they were! Out of his mind, out of his Christ-filled, cross-impassioned heart, out of his biblical faith, he remembered these two impossible questions, the first from Isaiah: "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?"

A man recalled going to a revival. In its fourth hour suddenly, the presiding minister stood up and said, "Brothers and sisters, I'm so full of the Lord that I don't know what else to do! Let's all stand up and sing the doxology!" At the heart of Christian worship there is a deep sense of wonder at the goodness and greatness of God, which we hear in these words. Please sing along if you know them: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below. Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen."

That's exactly what Paul has come to after trying to help everybody understand how God's incredible grace was touching all people. The only way He could do that was to reveal the sovereignty and majesty of God.

Here was his doxology: "Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and how inscrutable are His ways!" All he could do at that moment was to shout in adoration.

Perhaps in our quest to make God more knowable, we have emphasized so much His humanity that we have diminished His divinity. We have put so much emphasis upon the eminence of God that we lost that sense of His transcendence. Such familiarity leads us to refer to Him as, "the man upstairs," which may be trying to make God in our image, forgetting that it is He who made us in His image.

Perhaps what we most need is to hear again the testimony of Biblical characters who experienced that majesty and greatness of God. The Hebrews of the Old Testament were so overcome by God's greatness that they would not pronounce His whole name because they were fearful of it. They spoke only the consonants.

When Moses saw God's back, his face shown so brightly that the people asked him to veil his face. And who can forget when Saul saw Jesus on the road to Damascus that he was blinded by the very image of Jesus.

So often we think the answer to inspiring ourselves is to do worship the right way. Some would say it needs to be very traditional to bring on the awe. Others would vote for the spirited and emotionalism of contemporary worship. Ultimately, it is not how we worship that makes worship inspiring it is whom we worship!

It's when we come before God to acknowledge that He truly is the Lord of all things and that we are sinners. Standing before Him, we recognize how powerless we are and how powerful He is. It is in that moment that we are, like Paul, humbled by His presence.

In our lesson, Paul is beginning his doxology of worship and praise to our maker: "Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and how inscrutable are His ways!" Now he can lead us to ponder Isaiah's question: "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?"

When we face seemingly impossible questions they are not meant to frustrate us. God uses them to lead us into a worship of praise, lost in wonder and love because we remember, as did Paul, the wondrousness of God.

He uses Job's question, "Or who has given a gift to God, that God should repay him?" as a way to remind us of who we are and who He is. What Job did was confess his humanity before God's divinity and surrender himself in adoration.

That also was Paul's response as he makes this magnificent confession of faith: "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be Glory forever. Amen." Paul answers those unanswerable questions by confessing the holiness and greatness of God and his own utter dependence on Him.

Worship that is full of wonder, love and praise always leads us to the awareness of God's holiness and our dependence. When we allow ourselves to worship, we become aware of God's holiness. We recognize that "from Him and through Him and to Him are all things." In the third verse of one of my favorite hymns "Holy, Holy, Holy," we hear these words, "Only thou art holy; there is none beside thee, perfect in power, in love and purity."

To be holy is to be different. Worship helps us to understand that God is totally different from us. God is absolute in power in love and in purity. We are totally opposite. God is sinless; we are sinners who need to confess and repent. God is unlimited, while we are limited. When we become aware of those differences we discover that we can never repay God for His goodness to us. All that we can do is to bow down, confess and surrender to Him in adoration.

When we worship we are not meant to be passive receivers. We come to give of ourselves, our prayers, our hopes, our dreams, our money, our talents, our time and our service to God, who gave all to us. God gives everything to us as gifts so that we can use them to serve Him by serving others.

We come to Him reverently, joyfully and thankfully because He created us out of love and wants us to reveal His love. Like Isaiah in the temple, we are people of “unclean lips, living in the midst of people of unclean lips.” Our God cleanses us, makes us whole and uses us in His service.

When we truly enter into worship we recognize that the goal of our worship is to be made holy by God, even as He is holy. Not only does holy mean different, it means set apart. Only a holy God can make us wholly different. A holy person is a Christ-like person, as Luther calls them a “little Christ.”

Peter reminds us in his epistle that we are a “chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people,” called “to declare the wonderful deeds of He who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

That is why as we end this chapter, Paul moves from talking about the awesomeness of God to calling us to, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Worship which is full of wonder, love and praise always requires something of us. Our awareness of God’s holiness reminds us that we are dependent upon God, but also that God is dependent on us. God requires the surrender of our lives, the totality of ourselves. In worship, we recognize our debt to God for His Grace and remember His call for obedience, which equips us to be His Holy people.

That is what Paul had in mind when he asks himself those two impossible questions: “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? “Or who has given a gift to God, that God should repay him?” That was why he sang a doxology of wonder and confessed his faith and adoration. Paul was a man lost in wonder, love and praise.

All Paul wanted to do was pass that sense of wonder, love and praise along to those following him. He hoped that we will also do the same for generations to come. That is exactly what God wants us to do.

Count me in: How will you share the greatness of God with someone?