

August 7, 2016  
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

**"Who Needs Worship?"**

by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 ~ Luke 12:32-40

Imagine you are here in worship today, and just as you are about to put your offering in the plate, even more generously than usual, I shouted out from this pulpit: *Hear what God says: "You skinflints and cheapskates! Keep your lousy money! Who asked you to come to my house with your expensive perfumes? Who needs all this noise you call "music?" Your prayers make me sick! Your pride makes me nauseous! You visit me one hour a week and think we're close? You treat your family like furniture and call yourself a member of my family? You argue politics over tax cuts while so many people don't make enough to pay any taxes because they don't make enough to buy groceries, and then you come here to pray about that new car you've been wanting? You curse your co-workers and bless my name with the same mouth? Get out of my house!"*

How would that make you feel? Would you jump up and shout, "Thanks be to God"?

Well, try to imagine how the people of Jerusalem felt the day that Isaiah the priest stood up in the Temple and said, *"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and calling of convocation-- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood"* (Isa 1:11-14)

And if you said "Isaiah, I'm doing the best I can!"? He would say, "No, you're not." If you said, "Isaiah, I'm here because God told me to be here!"? He would say, "That's not all God told you to do." If you said, "I worship because the scripture requires it!"? He would say, "Your worship is an empty exercise in self-promotion.

In Texas one of the most serious charges you can make against someone is saying he is "*all hat and no cowboy*." It means that person is a phony ... a poser ... someone whose words don't match his deeds ... you know, when someone talks the talk ... but doesn't walk the walk. Their lives aren't congruent. Their promises lack fulfillment. Their outward image is disconnected from their inner reality. If you are "*all hat and no cowboy*" you are all show and no substance.

Why is this lack of congruence such a serious charge? Because it is widespread and dangerous. This lack of congruence in our public discourse creates a credibility gap ... and credibility gaps lead people to disconnect. Students disconnect from teachers and refuse to learn. Parishioners disconnect from preachers and refuse to attend. Citizens disconnect from politicians and refuse to vote.

There was a time when people assumed there was (for the most part) congruence between what leaders said and what they would do. People didn't disconnect unless there was a serious breach of trust. You know: "*Fool me once shame on you; fool me twice shame on me.*" But the breach of social trust in our day has been so frequent and so severe that people assume incongruence and disconnect before there is even any reason to do so. They don't give you a chance to fool them once. Instead, you have to convince them to connect in the first place. You have to earn their trust. You have to demonstrate your reliability with a long obedience in the same direction. Only then will they buy in and participate.

A lack of congruence ... that was Isaiah's complaint. They worshipped the God of Israel as the people of Israel. They had a covenantal relationship between themselves and their God ... between themselves and each other ... just as we do ... with mutual responsibilities. But they worshipped God without regard to their responsibilities in relationship. They didn't feel the need to hold up their end of the covenant. They presumed upon the grace of God and felt no concern to look after their neighbors who were struggling to survive. Isaiah saw the rampant disregard for God ... the widespread suffering of poverty ... and the distance from the poorest to the richest in their land as a disaster "of Old Testament proportions," and he was outraged by their indifference. Couldn't they see in the light of this unrighteousness and injustice that their worship was an empty sham and a slap in God's face? So he told the people God didn't want ... didn't need ... and wouldn't honor their worship any more.

Well, Isaiah reminds us that God never needed our worship in the first place. God doesn't need anything from us I suppose. God is complete and entire. What do we have that can add to the Eternal Almighty Sovereign of all creation? Obviously, worship is something that we need. We need the time with God. We need the reconnection with God's presence. We need the beloved community where we have a place ... and a purpose ... and a context of support for striving with the challenges of our time. We need the experience of transcending ourselves ... of being lifted beyond our little lives and narrow self-focus ... to the greatness and magnificence of the infinite God ... and to the vision that God has of our world ... both what it is ... and what it could be. Because most of the time our circle of care isn't much bigger than ourselves, maybe our family, too, and maybe a few others. But God sees everybody, the whole system, the whole society, the whole world, and says, "Do you see what I see?" We look at the inhumanity of the world and say, "God, why don't you do something about that?" In worship, God replies, "Why don't you?" Who needs worship? I do. You do. We all do.

But I want to argue with Isaiah a bit here. I want to say we need worship precisely because our lives are not congruent with God's best hopes for us. We come here week after week after week to be reminded ... we come month after month ... year after year to remember the image ... and model and calling of the one who gave us life. Writes Mary Collins:

*To be human is to be threatened with spiritual amnesia. At the level of our spiritual identity we do not remember for long who we really are. Those ultimate relationships that give us our spiritual identity slip from consciousness all too easily, and we lapse into non-comprehension about our deepest identity. Corporate public ritual brings us together to participate actively in relationships that identify us spiritually. For it is in our faith and our experience that the mystery of Christ is always present. But it is equally our experience that we are inattentive to the truth of our origins and our destiny. We forget who we are, where we came from, where we are headed. The self-engaging activity of our liturgy not only causes us to remember who we are; it invites us to commit ourselves to a life congruent with our identity.*

"Congruent!" There's that word again. True worship makes us feel the distance between our ideals and our reality. Isaiah's complaint was for a people whose worship had become all self-congratulation and no self-examination. But if your worship is going to push you towards fulfillment, then you must first choose to worship in a context with a true God and worthy ideals.

When I began the task of writing my thesis to receive my Master's degree in Divinity I had already completed almost three years of study. To say that I was daunted by the task would be a masterpiece of understatement. Part of my work involved an understanding of an important and influential German systematic theologian named Jürgen Moltmann. I realized that it was important for me to know about this man's life experience before delving into his theology... in other words to make sure that his life was congruent with his beliefs. I learned that he was drafted into the German army at age 17 at the height of WW II and witnessed his best friend's death when he was struck by a bomb. He was forever changed by that event. His friend was literally blown to bits right before his eyes, and he has never stopped asking God the question, why him and not me? Moltmann discovered the liberating power of Jesus Christ while imprisoned in a POW camp after being given a Bible by a British chaplain.

He writes with deep anguish about the unspeakable horrors perpetrated on the helpless by his homeland. He doesn't flinch, or make excuses, but rather speaks truth and begs forgiveness. Of particular torment to him is the realization that the country he was laying down his life for was the same country that convened a meeting on January 20, 1942, and gathered eleven leaders, eight of whom had doctoral degrees from German universities, to solve a problem. They had already slaughtered 500,000 Jews in the part of Europe they occupied. But there were eleven million to go. They were using too much ammunition needed at the battle front. And part of the year the ground was too frozen to dig graves. They needed a more efficient way to kill *en masse*, and came up with what would come to be known as "The Final Solution" ... the commandeering of rail lines even at the expense of the war effort, the expansion of death camps, gas chambers, crematoria ... which would result in the death of another five and a half million Jews as well as five million gypsies, homosexuals, mentally ill and mentally disabled persons before the war would end.

Can you imagine being a part of that God forsaken gathering ... and then going out to live in congruence with its values in a conspiracy of such malevolence ... a malicious communion of Hell's agents? How could something like that ever happen? Yet we saw how step by step one of the most civilized and advanced nations of that day (a *Christian* nation) slid into indescribable barbarity because of the evil that lay within all people ... and the fear that leads the goodness in all people to keep silent.

Moltmann's early life was replete with one devastating event after the next, and yet his best known work is entitled The Theology of Hope. *Hope*? Devastation and hope? What a contrast! How can one possibly be hopeful in the face of utter despair? That's impossibly incongruent. But nothing is impossible for God, and through the grace of God, the love of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, Moltmann was able to choose hope. He dedicated his life to learning to live, and to help others live, in congruence and in communion, with a life that privileged the healing hope of salvation.

Each of our lives require the same choice ... will we be filled with despair or will we be filled with hope? I beseech you to choose carefully. Choose wisely. Make the choice which defines the person you want to be ... the place you want to go ... the people you want to become.

Because the choice you make will push you ... encourage you ... perhaps even require you to live congruently with its core values and purpose. And when you have chosen well, then strive to fulfill what the choice has promised.

Why do we come to worship when we know we don't always live by our deepest values when we are away from this place. Because we want to. We long to. We need to. Here we receive communion remembering that we are God's children. Here we realize that we were created in the image of God ... and are called to conform to the image of Christ ... to be led, step by step, with the steady steering winds of the Spirit. Here we remember who we are ... and want to be ... and can be ... God be our help and guide. Here we receive grace and join the beloved community of the people of God. I need it. You need it. We all need it, to be whole.

The purpose of worship is to call us back ... to lead us forward ... to lift us beyond. The purpose of worship is to show us what we lack ... how much we've fallen short ... how far we have to go before we will be mature ... congruent in word and deed, thought and action, perception and reality. But the purpose of worship also is to remind us that God is with us and among us and for us ... so that with God's help, we can do it.

Let us go out from here and live in hope, in Jesus name ... day by day and step by step, by the mercy of the mighty God. May we pray?

Thank you, O God, for inviting us to share your grace and join ourselves for the good to you and to one another. Now, oh Lord, spiritually nourish us, and in all our relationships encourage us to live by the core values of grace, joy and peace, of righteousness, justice, and humility, of faith, hope, and love. In Jesus' name. Amen