

I begin where the psalmist ended this morning, "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer."

Indeed, this is my unspoken prayer for all of us each and every Sunday. For every week as I go about the task of crafting a sermon, I pray that it will be acceptable to God. I spend time in prayer and in study as I wrestle with texts and imagine how to bring God's word to you. I wrestle with how God might be speaking to us individually as well as communally. Yes, as we hear the word spoken every Sunday, I pray that the meditations of all of hearts will be pleasing to God.

I, like the psalmist, am moved by God's creation, as I was this past Thursday night when I watched the moon be dimmed by passing clouds only to emerge like a spotlight as the clouds passed. At one point it beamed brightly surrounded by a halo of illumined clouds. This is when this psalm came to mind, "The heavens are telling to glory of God."

How do you see God's glory through creation? Do verdant green hills like I was surrounded by in Malibu Canyon bring forth praise? Or maybe it is the beauty of the ocean as sun dances off its electric blue surface. Or maybe the beauty of sculptured sandstone in the deserts of the southwest, cause you to erupt in praise. Or maybe it's witnessing a humming bird perched for moment or a flock of geese flying overhead.

I know that a colorful sunrise or sunset awakens my senses to the presence of God. Watching ocean waves break rhythmically along a shoreline signals to me God's faithfulness. Even as I watch the birds in my backyard take their baths in our pond, I marvel at God's provision for their lives and for mine. Like the psalmist, I, too believe that the natural world has a way of pouring forth speech that declares God's glory.

The psalmist moves from creation to the law saying, "The law of Lord is perfect." God's law revives the soul. God's law makes wise the simple. God's law brings joy. God's law opens eyes. Yet, when you hear the word "law" what comes to mind?

Rules, regulations, attorneys, things you cannot do, anything else come to mind? How about... the letter of the law or I am going lay done the law, etc.

Yet, the psalmist has a different understanding. The law for the psalmist is a template for living in covenant with God. It is a pattern of life individually embraced and communally lived out. The law is both a guide and goal for all of life. According to the psalmist God's ways – God's decrees, precepts, commandments, and ordinances - are life giving and life fulfilling.

The movement of this psalm is this. The psalmist's eyes are lifted to the heavens. God's glory is revealed. Then the psalmist's eyes close as the psalmist realizes that God will be glorified through his life as he lives according to God's ways. Or as Helen Pearson Smith said this past Tuesday, "Each of us is a divine story." Yes, God's story is being told through us, as we are kneaded into God's communal divine story. God's gathered people and God's creation reveal God's glory.

So, we have to ask ourselves as we turn to our reading from the Gospel of John what happened! God's people who are to reflect God's glory, who are to be the divine communal story, are chastised as they gather for worship. When Jesus shows up in the temple courtyard for worship, he yells, "Stop it!"

Now what is interesting to note about this particular incident is that it is recorded in all four gospels. In the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is recorded in chapters 21, 11 and 19 respectively. That is, it takes place in the last week of Jesus’ ministry, after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Yet, in our reading today John’s gospel has barely started. Jesus’ table turning pandemonium in the temple courtyard is his first public act! The disciples have been called, some wine has been poured at a wedding, but there has been no healing, no preaching, no teaching, no three years of ministry. In John, Jesus begins his ministry by creating havoc! What a way to start a ministry!

Now debating the chronology of this event misses the theological reason why John placed it at the beginning of his gospel rather than in Jesus’ final week. Just prior to this event, John’s gospel records the first of seven signs, Jesus turning water into wine. John writes, “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory.”

John’s placement of the temple cleansing narrative directly after the first of Jesus’ signs deepens the revelation of Jesus’ identity. Like a prophet, Jesus is speaking and acting according to God’s word. Of course, we know from John’s gospel that Jesus not only speaks God’s word, Jesus is God’s Word – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

With this information we know why this story shows up in the beginning of John’s Gospel rather than in his last week, but we still don’t have an answer as to why Jesus “chased the merchants and money changers out of the temple, stampeding the cattle and sheep, upending the tables, and spilling the coins left and right.”

Let me give you a hint, it has to do with the “Law.” The law required the activities taking place in the temple courtyard. In Leviticus the offerings required were clearly explained. Pilgrims traveling long distances to Jerusalem needed unblemished animals for their sacrificial offerings. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that cattle, sheep and doves were available for purchase, as who could bring these offerings over long distances unblemished?

In similar way Roman coins, which bore the image of the emperor, had to be exchanged for imageless coins. The temple tax required to sustain the institution could not be paid with Roman coins. What was transpiring in the temple courtyard was according to the law and for the benefit of the pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. Yet, Jesus witnesses something that caused him to make a whip of cords for he said, “Stop making my Father’s house into a marketplace!” What was required to meet the needs of traveling pilgrims had become the temple’s focus.

Marketplace faith! Isn’t that where we often find ourselves in this 21st century. Coming from the land of mega churches where coffee shops and food courts are a staple of worship facility design as well as children’s playgrounds that look a lot like Disneyland, it’s easy to point the finger at other churches. Jesus might overturn their tables, but not ours, for we don’t do that, Jesus, but those churches do!

Yet, even in smaller churches, it is easy to fall into the trap of meeting the needs of worshipping consumers in order to sustain ministry, rather than focus on glorifying God. Individual needs have a way of taking precedence over the real purpose of our

gathering as succinctly stated in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, “Humanity’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever.”

I appreciate that Jesus’ disciples, who at this point were Simon, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael knew the scriptures. “It is written,” they said to explain Jesus’ behavior. From the psalmist they knew that “Zeal for God’s house would consume Jesus.”

Jesus’ first temple visit recorded in John’s Gospel makes it clear that Jesus is not going to pander to a crowd. Jesus upsets the status quo for the temple had become a marketplace rather than a house of worship and prayer, glorifying and enjoying God.

What about us? If Jesus were to walk into our house of worship, what might he overturn and chase out? What takes precedent for us when we gather? Do we gather to glorify and enjoy God or do we gather to just meet our individual needs and preferences?

Companions, the contemplative retreat that I participated in this past week, has a way of centering my soul on what is most important. It always feels like Jesus shows up to overturn the tables of my day to day ministry, while drawing my attention to the marketplace faith that insidiously seeps into church work. My schedule can get so full with demands that I miss connecting with the real reason why I do what I do as your pastor. I am called by God, not to meet my ego needs or your needs and desires – the marketplace scene in the temple courtyard - but to be a companion that leads us to glorify and enjoy God forever.

When churches leave God out of the equation, churches become nothing more than a marketplace catering to needs of whomever darkens our doors.

This past week as I began my time away I wrote in my prayer journal, which is a spiritual practice of mine, “I come so overfull with obligations and responsibilities. I am paddling as fast as I can to keep my head above water. Help me to just breathe this week. Help me to be fully present to you, O God, and to those whom I am gathered with.” I spent the week enjoying God’s very palpable presence in community as we ate breakfast in silence, as we listened to spiritual wisdom from our speakers, as we used the creative medium of art and reflection to deepen our understanding of the wisdom imparted, as we explored God’s word through small groups and gathered for worship to be fed at the table of grace each day.

We get so busy in the church doing what we think we have to do that we forget why we do what we do. *Companions* has a way of reminding me why we gather as a church. We gather because the divine mystery we call God has called us by name. We gather to hear God’s divine story and to be equipped to be God’s divine story into a world which is in deep need.

Yet, as individuals or as a church we are not to rush out and meet a need. Listen instead to this wisdom, “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs, ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, for what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

The wisdom of Howard Thurman’s quote speaks to our texts today, for what makes us come alive when we witness God’s natural creation. What makes us come alive when we gather to worship God? What makes us come alive as we enjoy God and our relationship with God?

What makes your pastor come alive is connecting the head to the heart, because when this happens faith comes alive in us. Our faith is not following rules – getting our appropriate sacrifices and temple coins in order as we come to worship. Our faith is not just an intellectual ascent – I know about God and, like the disciples, I know what is written!

Our faith is a relationship with the Triune Mystery we have come to know most fully through Jesus Christ. The one who overturned tables, because the faithful gathered had missed the point of their gathering.

Our worship each and every Sunday is an opportunity to nurture our relationship with God. It is an opportunity to glorify God giving thanks for all God has done throughout the ages and in and through our individual and communal lives. It is an opportunity to enjoy God, to marvel at God's provision in our lives and the life of this church, to marvel at God's persistent and insistent pursuit of us, and to marvel at God's never-ending creativity, which so beautifully surrounds each and every day.

Jesus overturned the tables because those gathered had lost sight of why they gathered. Marketplace faith is not what God intends for the church.

What is the chief end of humanity and the church? To glorify God and to enjoy God forever. May we never lose sight as to why we gather as the church to worship and serve. Amen.