

Roslyn. October 23, 2016. The Feast of St. James, Brother of Our Lord

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest who intercedes on our behalf before the throne of the Father!

In a report to the Conference of Bishops, Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton made this statement about who we are as the collective people of God: “We are church, we are Lutheran, we are church together, and we are church for the sake of the world.” As she expounded on each of these four points, she said that the center “of our life together is worship, and at the center of our worship is the crucified and risen Christ...” I have always been struck by this confession that worship is the center of our life together as Christians. Bishop Eaton is wholly correct. Her statement highlights exactly, clearly, and concisely what fundamentally marks us as Christians—namely, that worship is the center of who we are as Christians, and the center of our worship is Christ. Ultimately, then, we can say Christ is our center.

At Living Word, we come together each week to worship. It is the centering element of our life together. We come together. We pray. We sing. We read Scripture. We engage the Word of God. We remember our baptism. We share communion. We worship. This is the one constant reality of our life together as the people of God in Roslyn, Pennsylvania. There are many ministries at Living Word, but the unifying mark of our community is our weekly worship.

But there is not a unified agreement among us what worship looks like. As your pastor, I have heard from numerous folks regarding worship preferences—and more often than not, it’s stated as which style of worship a particular person doesn’t like. Some don’t like traditional worship. Some don’t like contemporary worship. And yes—some don’t even like what would seem like the compromise between the both traditional and contemporary worship, our blended style of worship. The members at Living Word have a wide array of opinions, preferences, and expectations about what makes for good worship. These opinions are neither right nor wrong; they simply are.

So what are we to do as a worshipping people? Worship is, after all, the critical marker of our life together. If we can’t agree on what worship should look like, wouldn’t it seem we find ourselves at a critical impasse? If we aren’t worshipping in a way that people like, aren’t we failing the members of our congregation? These are important questions. But we can’t forget that worship is only part of what marks us as who we are as the people of God.

In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul writes that “if I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.” These are bold words, but they speak to our situation as a worshipping community with different opinions, preferences, and expectations about what makes for good worship—namely, pleasing people. Paul clearly tells us that the point isn’t about us. The point is Christ. The point of being the people of God isn’t about us, but rather about our life in Christ. That’s what Bishop Eaton means when she says that “our life together is worship, and at the center of our worship is the crucified and risen Christ.” When we are baptized into Christ, we have put on Christ and we become a wholly new creation in him. Our old self is put to death and

a new self rises, born again, from the water—a new self that is ready to lay aside selfish concerns to meet the needs of those around us. The Holy Spirit takes hold of us and we are led to lives of self-sacrifice such that our entire lives become a living sacrifice to God. The baptized life is not about us, but it's about Christ—Christ in our friend, neighbor, and even in the stranger.

Worship is a place where we encounter God and God encounters us. We come to worship to be fed and nourished by God's presence in the Word and in the sacraments. We cry out to God in song—lifting up our voices in praise, joy, lament, sorrow, and even at times anger. We call out to God in our prayer and listen for God to speak to us—even in ways that might seem unexpected through a hymn or song that we might not “like,” but we know our brother or sister in Christ finds life-giving and nourishing. We welcome each other in worship as Christ first welcomed us—as broken people needing to hear a word of welcome and not of condemnation. When we embody these Christly qualities, our worship becomes a living sacrifice not only in Spirit and Truth, but also in Body and Deed.

The nature of worship is much more than opinions, preferences, and expectations about what makes for good worship. The nature of worship has to do with our very mission as the people of God, and we are reminded of that each week at the end of each worship service. At the conclusion of worship, we are *sent* into the world to engage, labor, struggle, suffer, proclaim, witness, and serve as the body of Christ in God's mission. Comforted with a promise in the enduring Word of God and nourished by that same promise in communion, we are empowered and sent by God's Spirit to witness to the world, in both word and deed, that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and has transformed us and is transforming us even now. In this sense, we are not *merely* a worshipping community, but we are a *missioning* community. It's so much more than what I want, but much more about what God wants. Worship is the time where God's will is made real for us in our presence, and we are blessed to partake of that mystery. Will we always get it right? No—but we can enter into the mystery with an expectant hope and promising joy that whatever happens will transform us and equip us to become ever more the body of Christ in the world, a world that so desperately needs to hear and experience the self-giving, self-denying love of God who cares so deeply for us that he sent his only Son into the world to reconcile us to himself and make us one with him. This is what worship is about and we are eternally blessed that God has welcomed us into this mystery.

May the God of peace, who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, our eternal and everlasting High Priest, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Yours in Christ our Lord,

Pr. Daniel