

Let me begin by correcting what I might have given last week as a misleading impression. I think it's another example of the variations of the English and American language. I mentioned last week that I've just had a birthday, which meant I'd entered my 60th year. Now my wife pointed out afterwards that to an English person, they'd understand that I'd just turned 59, but an American might think that I was 60. So, I want to correct that impression. I am indeed 59. I want to do that because I don't want to think next year when I say that I'm 60 that people think I've stopped counting, so that was the impression I wanted to make sure was clear.

Anyway, back to the reading set for the day. It seems to me that they both have something important to say about what the writer to the Hebrews calls acceptable worship. I thought it might be worth spending a few minutes about what that phrase included in the epistle "acceptable worship" might mean. But let me begin with our gospel reading, which is a story about something that happened in the course of an act of worship. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath day and Luke tells us earlier in the gospel that it was Jesus' custom to worship every Sabbath in the synagogue with the rest of the community. Of course, God can be worshiped anywhere. We can worship God on our own, but there is something special about coming together to worship with others. Jesus himself said, "Wherever two or three are gathered, there am I in the midst of them." It was Jesus' custom to worship with others. In other words, that was his habit.

We are all very familiar with bad habits and we could, I'm sure, all list various bad habits that we have, but we mustn't overlook the fact that there are good habits. That habit in itself is not a bad thing, and I think that the practice of gathering together on a Sunday morning to worship, whether in person or online as we are, is a good habit to get into. It shouldn't just be that we go to church when we feel like it. There are so many things these days that compete for our attention, that if we don't make it a habit to attend church, then the chances are we very rarely will. And it's good for many reasons to take the time at the beginning of the week, just to slow down, to come together with others and reflect, and turn our attention away from ourselves and our own

concerns and fix our attention instead on the God who made us.

Here in the parish office, we can tell not just how many people are watching this service online, but actually there's a facility for us to know when people are watching it. And I haven't checked recently, but certainly in the very early days of the pandemic when we were all stuck at home, it was very obvious that the overwhelming majority of people were tuning into this online service at 10:00 AM (i.e. Our regular worship time here at St. James). They may not have been wearing the same clothes that they would've been wearing had they come to church, but they were watching at the same time as if they'd come to church here in person, which is a good example I think of the positivity of a good habit.

So let's get back to Jesus in the synagogue and the story in the gospel. Jesus interrupts the service when he catches sight of a woman whose ailment had meant that she wasn't able to stand up straight. Jesus laid his hands on her and healed her. Immediately we are told, the woman began praising God and the rest of the people there joined in rejoicing, but not everybody was happy. The leader of the synagogue was so upset that we are told he became indignant. Now it's easy to see this poor man as the sort of bad guy in the story, and certainly, he did get a stinging rebuke from Jesus. But I think we need to be mindful that his intentions weren't bad, and his concerns were not without merit.

He cares about doing things right and properly in the synagogue. He cares about right worship, right belief, and right practice. He cares about honoring the Sabbath and keeping it holy and upholding the faith-filled traditions of his spiritual community. His mistake was to make these religious practices ends in themselves. For him, the traditions ultimately became an obstacle to the true worship of God, not a means to that end. We should note that the writer to the Hebrews talks about acceptable worship, not right worship. There are many ways of worshiping God, even in this small town of La Jolla, there are ... Every week, there are many different ways practiced to worship God where God is worshiped in a variety of ways. None of them are perfect. All have their strengths and their weaknesses. None can claim to be the one and only right way of worshiping God.

So, let's look a bit closer at the characteristics of acceptable worship. I think the first thing we can say is that acceptable worship begins with thanksgiving. In the epistle the writer reminds his readers of the coming kingdom and concludes, "Let us give thanks by which we offered to God an acceptable worship." And I'm sure that the crippled woman in the gospel was giving thanks to God when she was healed, and she turned to him in praise. Acceptable worship begins with thanksgiving and it's an acknowledgement that everything we have comes as a gift.

There was a very devout and Christian man once who went to a restaurant. The restaurant was crowded. He was about to begin his meal when a stranger came up to him and asked if he could share his table. The restaurant was crowded, so the man said, "Yes, of course." And he sat down. Then as was his custom, the Christian man bowed his head in prayer. When he opened his eyes, the man asked, "Do you have a headache?" "No," said the Christian. "Well, is there something wrong with your food?" "No," he replied. "I was simply thanking God before I eat as I always do, as is my habit and custom." The stranger said, "Ah, you are one of those, are you? Well, I want you to know that I never give thanks. I earn my money by the sweat of my brow, and I don't have to give thanks to anybody. I just start right in." The Christian man said, "Ah, you're just like my dog. That's what he does."

Abraham Lincoln made the same point, rather more poetically. He said, "We have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God who made us." There is no pride in acceptable worship. It's a coming before God in humble thankfulness for the wonder and goodness of God's creation.

The epistle mentions two other characteristics of acceptable worship, namely reverence and awe. Reverence is not a word that we hear much of these

days. In fact, the opposite, irreverence has strangely become something of a virtue. So we might see a television program advertised as an irreverent look at the news for the week. Even many churches would want to veer away from reverence, so informality is often valued more highly than reverence. That is not so much of an issue for us Episcopalians. We like things to be done decently and in order. The danger for us is that the accoutrements of our worship might keep God at a distance. St. Paul talks about holding on to the outward form of godliness but denying its work. The danger for us is that we might make the same mistake as the leader of the synagogue and focus too much on getting our worship right.

The vestry have been thinking in recent months about our key values as a church. We recognize that we are on the cusp of an important season for us, which I fully anticipate to be a season of growth, and we are toying with a new tagline to put on our publicity to kind of refresh our communications and let people know about the good things that are going on here at St. James. And the tagline we're coming up with is, "Refreshing traditions. Beautiful, reverent, thoughtful." We feel that this will let others outside of our parish community give them an impression of who we are or what we are about and how we worship. I'd be interested to know what you think of that suggestion. We don't want to exclude anyone. We're saying this is who we are, this is how we worship. We want to offer God worship in our own style and tradition to the best of our abilities. We're not saying it's the right or only way to worship God. It's how we do it. That's our Episcopal tradition and we want to do it as well as we can.

So, I think this story and these readings speak to us as a worshiping community. I think they also challenge us as individuals. Are we like the woman in the story freed up by Jesus to praise God with a full and thankful heart? Or do we have more in common with the leader of the synagogue, so entrenched in our own theology, liturgical, cultural, and political views that there's no room for Jesus to show up and surprise us? May we always be thankful people offering acceptable worship to God. Amen.