

“Living Worship”

Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-8 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – August 23, 2020

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might seek your presence in our own hearts and as a community. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Our scripture readings today are going to take us back to some very basic lessons about what it means to be a Christian. Given that practically everything feels like a struggle these days and our brains often seem like they're turning to mush, I'm guessing this might be a good thing. At any rate, it can't hurt to remind ourselves why we've chosen to follow Jesus and how that commitment is supposed to be affecting our lives. Just asking that question points us in the right direction. Following Jesus is supposed to affect our lives. It's supposed to make a difference in the way we live. It's weird how easy it is to forget that, especially if we've been around church our whole lives. But it's true. It's what Paul is getting at when he calls us to be “transformed” rather than “conformed”. He's calling us to live our lives as worship, or – to put it in the terms of the passage we heard from Matthew – to proclaim Jesus is the Son of the Living God by the way we live.

So today I want to talk a little bit about how we do that, in this strange and difficult season we're living in. There are some good hints in each of our scripture readings that can help us. First of all, let's go back to that line about formation that Paul offers. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the

renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” There are a few things we can learn just from this one sentence. First of all, the world is going to put pressure on us, and that pressure may draw us away from the will of God. Secondly, the transformation that our faith requires is not a one-time thing, but a continual renewal; it is a life-long process. Thirdly, this transformation is not for our own sake, but so that we can more faithfully join in the good God is doing in our world.

I’m sure you can think of some ways in which the world pressures you away from the will of God. We’re pushed to look out just for ourselves and our families; we’re pushed to see people on “the other side” of a given issue as “idiots” or worse. We’re pushed to choose judgment rather than compassion, to be selfish, greedy, and fearful of those who are different than we are. And I’m sure you have experienced how our efforts to withstand this pressure only work when they are constant. No bad habit goes away because we decided once to stop doing it. The conditioning our society embeds within us, whether it’s hatred of our own bodies or the practices of white supremacy, do not just exit our systems the day we decide they aren’t helpful. Constant renewing of our minds and hearts is the core of our faith. And when we’re at our best, it becomes obvious that we aren’t submitting ourselves to these practices just to become better people; we do it in order to align our souls and our lives with the work of God in our midst.

Under normal circumstances, I would probably talk a lot at this point about how important it is to be part of a faith community in order to do this work of continually renewing our minds. And certainly, the way Paul turns immediately to the body of Christ and the varieties of gifts we all bring to it shows us how important our faith community is. But given our current circumstances, I want to go back to the reading from Matthew and look at this from the other direction.

There's an interesting dynamic going on here that tells us something about how spiritual wisdom is acquired. First, Jesus asks the disciples who "people" think he is. The answers are varied in name, but uniformly wrong. Then Jesus asks who the disciples think he is. Peter is the one who speaks up: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And when Jesus blesses him for this faith, he makes a very telling observation: "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." As important as community is for our spiritual formation, we can't crowd source our faith. It is not enough to be connected to the Body of Christ; we must also commune with the Living God if we truly want to grow in faith.

In these challenging days when staying connected to the Body of Christ requires extra, intentional effort, regular communion with the Living God becomes that much more important. We get spiritual fuel in two ways: by gathering together and by spending time alone with God. Since we can't gather right now, it's absolutely vital that we intentionally make space in our lives to spend time with God. Ironically, if we neglect this, even our connections to the Body of Christ will wither.

When we can't gather as the Body of Christ, we must lean in even more deeply to seeking out the presence and guidance of the Living God, in order to keep renewing our minds. Without it, the world will push us into conformity. Without it, following Jesus will have no discernable impact on our lives. As a congregation of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and as specifically Vista La Mesa Christian Church, I believe we must confess that we sometimes over-emphasize the Body of Christ side of this balance, leaving our communing with the Living God skills somewhat underdeveloped or rusty. We love community, and that is a beautiful thing. We experience God in community, and we share God's love in broader and broader ripples of community because of that. But we must also learn to experience God directly as individuals, to recognize and articulate God's presence and work in our own lives. Otherwise, even our experience of God in community will weaken and begin to conform to the ways the world draws people together.

What better time than this pandemic for us to practice experiencing the presence of God in solitude? This is what we have right now; there is blessing awaiting us if we will just open our hearts to it. As Paul says, we all bring different gifts, so it shouldn't surprise us if this is easier for some of us than others. We will need to share tips and habits and practices, till we all find methods that connect the deepest parts of our souls with the heart of God.

Your church is already offering you a multitude of tools. Are you making space to worship with the kit we send out each week? Do you text the Peace of Christ to a

few others as you begin? Do you slow down as you read the Prayers of the People and picture those mentioned as you say the responses? Do you sing the songs? Do you pause to reflect on your connection to the Church Universal when you eat and drink whatever it is that's constituting Christ's Table at your house?

When you receive the emails with Michael's Bible reflections each Monday and Thursday, do you reserve a few moments to read them carefully, to sit with them and pray to hear what God is sharing with you through them? On Wednesdays, when you see the Facebook reminder about our weekly prayer practice, do you stop and pray? Or have you fenced off 7 am or 7 pm to work your way through those prayers, holding up our church family, our efforts at growth and vitality, your pastor, and the people whom God is preparing to join us? We can probably all use a little renewal of our commitments. I am going to make a promise to you today about my own practices. When I do that Wednesday prayer, I am going to work my way through the index cards upon which I've written each your names, and I'm going to pray for an increased awareness of God's presence and work in your life.

If we want to be transformed through the renewing of our minds, it can't just be about sharing our gifts. If we want our lives to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, we need to commune with the Living God, so that we can discern more faithfully the will of God and be sure it's Jesus we're proclaiming. We will not all do this the same way; that's part of the blessing of the Body of Christ. But we must all do it in some way, offering our lives as worship to the Living God. Hallelujah and Amen!