

*The Day That Makes the Difference*

Scripture Lessons: Hebrews 12:18-29, Luke 13:10-17

Hebrews is written out of the history of the great tradition of worship and sacrifice, of holiness and standing before God. The good news from Hebrews is that Jesus has become the great priest who offers the last sacrifice, and he is also the one sacrifice for sin. Hebrews says that when you come to worship, “You have not come to something that can be touched.”

We come to Sunday with our weekday identities and our full schedules, our workday worlds and our family obligations, our personal worries and our pressure in the day – and everyday. Sunday is a different day, but we are the same people in it. We bring our world to church and to worship. We keep reaching out for help, but there does not seem to be anything we can grab. Often we wonder why something in the service does not “touch us.” Worship is being touched by something that is always beyond our touching. Maybe the question is why we don’t sense the touch. Are we so full of the sameness of the day and the to-do’s and the life we live in the week? Are we reaching out so much to touch something that we miss the different touch that comes to us when we recognize the day is different?

We would never think we are like that leader of that synagogue who was surprised and put-off when Jesus healed a woman by the unexpected touch in the middle of a worship service. But we are all creatures of routine. You have noticed that I have trouble with the Hymn of Preparation, because I am just not used to singing before the scripture lessons. I keep jumping up at the wrong time. Most all of us sit in the same place every Sunday, and we do it without thinking. If someone roped off the back pews to try to move us closer, to give us a different sense of togetherness, we would notice, and maybe protest. But maybe we would just lift the ropes and take our place – our usual, accustomed, comfortable place. We gather for worship, we talk with friends, but are our minds on *worship*? The Call to Worship is more like of a Call to Order to get our attention away from the chaos of the world we brought into the sanctuary. What keeps us from recognizing that we are standing in a holy place.

Do we really think of Sunday as a “holy day”? Do we mark it off with spiritual brackets and “set it aside” for different purposes? Of course, Sunday is a bit different from the workdays, but do we just do different work on Sunday? Do we ask ourselves *how* Sunday is different? Is worship and church and intermission from the to-do list of usual activities and grocery shopping and getting ready for another week? Do we play or re-create? Do we rest or re-fresh? Do we relax or renew?

What do you expect on Sunday in a sanctuary? What do we expect from worship? Do we think that something different might happen? ...that we might be touched by Spirit in some way that heals us, strengthens us, shapes us, changes us? Do we come with great expectations, a sense that we will be touched from beyond by Spirit? Do we anticipate we will be connected to grace, forgiven our failures, empowered to live love? Or do you just come, because..., well you haven’t thought about it that much?

Worship is being touched by something that is always beyond our touching. Isaiah was in the temple doing his routine duties as a priest. He never expected angels and voices singing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.” There is a necessary “other” about worship, some sign or signal that we have stepped out of the ordinary and the routine and the everyday. Do we really have a sense of the difference of this room? Do we really think of this place as a sanctuary of otherness? ... of holiness? Do we look for something here that cannot be found anywhere else? This place is not like other places, and this hour is different from all the other hours. This day is the day that makes the difference.

Every three years or so, I go back to Duke for study leave. Most years I don't stay over Sunday, but one year it was All Saints – and you will learn that All Saints one of my most important holy-days. Will Willimon, Dean of the Chapel, was leading the communion meditation. He talked about why sanctuaries are different. He remembered high school chemistry. The room was different, full of black topped lab tables and test tubes and strange equipment. The teacher wore a white lab coat. She began the year by saying, “This is Chemistry. Chemistry is a different class. We use terms you have never heard before, and we talk about elements and chemical reactions that are strange and mysterious. We have this chart on the wall that does not make any sense to you now. I know you do not know chemistry yet, but it is at the very heart of everything you do. It is essential to your life. If you will just trust me, study and work and learn as we go along, I promise you that by the end of the semester you will know chemistry, and you will understand your life and your world in ways you never knew before.

This is worship. Worship is a different hour. Worship is a place where strange and mysterious things happen, and when we focus and pray and learn as we go along, we understand our lives very differently and we see the world differently in ways that grace and trust reveal to us. Worship is the place where we realize that we have committed to live a different way of life, and the pattern of our worship is a model for the way we live differently. We understand that we belong to Christ, and we intend to be followers who trust and obey him. So our worship is full of good intentions, full of intentionality.

Worship is not a spectator sport or a pep-rally or a motivational event like other places we attend. Worship is a drama, but it is not like any other theatre. Worship is a drama, we are the actors, and God is the very involved audience. Worship is a performance, but it is you and me together acting out our trust before the God who has touched our lives and keeps touching life with healing and strengthening, with shaping and changing to form and re-form us. Worship is an intentional drama that moves through four acts every week.

Act One, Gathering: We gather together in the Spirit's presence and give thanks and praise that life is different because of Christ's presence in us and in the world. We sing our praise because words are not enough before God. We open our minds in words, but we open our hearts in song.

Act Two, Confessing: We see who we are differently because of who Christ is, and we freely admit we are not there yet – we want to be more like Christ and we fail and fall short. We don't tell our faults so God will know them. We speak our failures to tell God that we know them and we want to change them. Christ assures us that forgiveness is already ours, and he has more power than we have to grow us into his likeness. At the heart of these strange elements and the mystery of the way God has made us, we are made for love and we can live a greater love.

That is why we share the peace of Christ after we have heard the assurance of forgiveness. “Passing the peace” is not intermission time, not time to ask how the week went or to recruit someone to help with the next church event. It is not really a time for chit-chat or friendly talk. Passing the peace is part of the Confessing act in worship. Sharing Christ’s peace is the exclamation point of the second act of the drama. We remind each other that in the middle of our failures and in the trouble and evil of the world what keeps it all going is nothing less than the peace that the world cannot give, but Christ freely gives and we freely share.

Act Three, Proclaiming Grace: So now that we know we are bound together in this different peace and the power of new life that Christ gives, we are ready to listen to what grace may ask. We read text, where people have told the history of grace for ages. We listen for the voice in the present that comes from words of the past. Sermons are not pretty stories, or great oratory, or lectures. They are just ways to learn some lessons in the present tense of our living from the trust and faith of faithful living in the past tense.

I always say that a sermon is best when you are “half-listening.” I’m up here saying some things, but you are not a passive listener. You are carrying on a three-way conversation where you and the Spirit hear something I say, and you two talk about it for a while and you think of ways that your life and God’s love can do something about some word you hear. You connect to grace that makes a difference in your life in the holiness of the day and the intention of the hour.

You see, Act Three is not over until the Responding comes from the Proclaiming. Somewhere in worship there is some way that we connect to grace – a phrase in a song, a point in a prayer, a sense of presence in the Lord’s Supper, an impression or thought at stays with us and calls us to reflect, react, re-form some idea or action.

Every time Jesus touched people, he changed them in some way. They responded in some way that made their lives different. Think about it for a moment. A good person who obeyed all the laws from his youth is challenged by Jesus to do more, give more, commit more, and he responds by going away sad because he just can’t commit more. A woman comes in to worship the same way for 18 years, praying and hoping and maybe some days resigned to never being different – but still being faithful. And she is healed by Jesus’ touch and Spirit’s power.

So Act Three is Proclaiming and Responding, and it closes with prayers. We pray to live out our responding to love’s proclaiming, and we pray for a world in places where faithful responses increase grace, and for the places where responses make grace’s work harder to do.

Act Four, Sending: The offering is not an intermission, either. It is not time to catch our breath and pass the plate and listen to the music or whisper to a neighbor. Offering is ...well, offering. It is giving. It is giving ourselves to live the grace we have received so freely. It is time to say thanks for the gifts that God gives, to say we will use God’s gifts the way God wants them used. It is a time to say that we know Christ never leaves us, and Christ goes before us, and the work of grace is always done out there in the world more than here in the sanctuary. We can’t wait to get out there and do some good with God this week. We know we have been given grace sufficient for every need. We know we have the gift of Spirit power for the doing. We know that we are all sent to live the love, share the faith, show the hope.

Worship really is a drama in four acts, but the curtain never falls and the drama never ends. The difference in the day we call Sunday is the expectation of connecting to grace, the anticipation of presence that is peace power, the listening that becomes doing with God. Sunday

becomes the day that makes all the difference. It heals us, strengthens us, shapes us, and changes us. Sabbath is more than rest from the week. Sabbath is being touched by holiness –wholeness – that makes all the difference the rest of the week.

His name was Bob. He was painfully shy. He and his wife would sneak in just as the prelude started and sit about four rows from the back by themselves. He was asked to be an usher once, but he said simply that he could not do it. He and his wife never came to a fellowship, never joined a class, just came to worship and went every week. We didn't make judgments about them, but we kept asking how we could get them more involved. They were such private people, shy and distant folk.

I missed Bob several weeks. He did not appear during the prelude and take his usual place. I happened to see him in town, and casually said that I had missed him. "We have been in California the last month. Our daughter lives out there. She has two children, two autistic children. We go to help her, to relieve her some, and to love our grandchildren. We want them our grandchildren to know we love them." Then he paused and said these exact words (I will always remember these exact words), "It wasn't easy out there. I missed church. I mean we weren't able to go on Sunday. When I am not in church on Sunday, I can barely make it through the week. Most every week by Friday, I need what I get in worship, ...and I can't get it anywhere else."

He came every week, sat in the same pew every week. But he did not come out of habit. He did not come to see friends or have community. He did not come for the sanctuary of sameness in a world of turmoil. He came to be touched by the other of holiness. He came to connect to the grace that was sufficient. He came because Sunday made all the difference in his week, worship gave him the grace that sent him into the world with power to live differently. This is Sunday. Sunday is the day that makes the difference.

This is worship. Worship is a different hour. We sing different music, and we wear strange garments. I know you may not understand Christ's grace yet, but it is at the very heart of everything you do. Worship is essential to your different life. If you will just trust and confess and pray and learn as we go along, I promise you that by the end you will know grace. You will understand your life and your world in ways you never imagined before.