

Homily – Praise God

Rob Keim

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Over my nine years at St. Barnabas we have changed up a few things in our worship service here at St. Barnabas. For example, many of you love the sung introduction to the Eucharist that is on those yellow booklets, and next week at our 10am worship we will begin doing that again. However, one of the things that has not changed is that we sing the Doxology as the offering plates are brought up to the altar right before we move into the Eucharist.

Now, I'm sure there will come a time in the not so distant future when we will go through a season of worship without singing the Doxology. If I was that type of priest, then I would already know how many of you are going to give me feedback after the service – feedback that you are alarmed that we are changing one of your favorite parts of the worship service. Or, feedback that you are tired of singing the Doxology. Or, feedback that we should sing another, better version of the Doxology.

It is important that we share feedback with one another, and I welcome feedback. I think I have shared with many of you that I get more feedback about worship music than any other topic. And, of course the feedback is diverse. One person will tell me they are so glad that we finally sang their favorite hymn, while another person will tell me that they specifically dislike the exact same hymn.

Again, we welcome feedback, and I am particularly glad that most of the feedback I hear or read about worship is positive. It is important that we remember to share our thanks and praise with one another. Praise is important for both the receiver and the giver.

Sometimes we think that praise is only important for the person receiving it. They get a boost. But, praise is also important for the person giving it. When we give praise our brains shift. Our hearts lift. Our attitude turns to gratitude

Now, one of my prayers for our community of St. Barnabas is that we are a community that praises, thanks and affirms one another. Just as praise is important for us as individuals, praise is also an important shaper of a culture. Here at St. Barnabas we want to have a culture of praise. This doesn't mean we put our heads in the sand and ignore things that need to be changed or improved. However, it does mean that we have a positive uplifting culture, and praise, thanks, and affirmation can be foundational elements to that culture.

I can assure you that when people see a community of praise they notice. They say, “how can I get what they have?”

It seems to me that our twenty-first century culture could use a bit more praise, thanks and affirmation.

If I was that type of priest, I might have played the drinking game during presidential candidate debates. This version of the drinking game would have one take a drink every time you heard praise, thanks or affirmation from one candidate to another. It wouldn't count if a candidate was praising him or herself. Only real praise should count. If you played this version of the drinking game do you think you would be thirsty by the end? Again, my prayer is that we can be a community here at St. Barnabas in which we have praise as one of the foundational elements.

Now, praising one another is important, but praising God is even more important. Praise of God is important for our spiritual health and wellbeing. We praise God for our many blessings. We praise God for our creation and very being. We praise God for always being present with us and loving us unconditionally. We praise God for Jesus.

I think we all have a reasonably good idea about why it is important for us to praise one another, but we don't have as clear an understanding of why it is important for us to praise God. So, here is my own incomplete list.

First, when we praise God it re-enforces in our own minds that God exists. Plain and simple. You can't praise God and deny the existence of God. At the same time praising God draws our awareness to God. Our persistent folly is to push God away or ignore God. Praising God draws our hearts and minds back to God.

Second, our praise of God helps to shape our ideas about who and what God is. God is beyond definition and comprehension, but our praise of God helps us to understand just a little bit more about God.

Third, when we praise God for our creation and being, it acknowledges that we did not create ourselves. We are not just the product of an egg and a sperm. God gives us life and sustains that life, and praising God re-enforces God-the Creator in our minds.

Fourth, when we praise God we recognize that we are also dependent on God. We can't do it all on our own either as individuals or as a world. Praising God helps counteract the pervasive myth of independence.

Fifth, praising God allows us to focus on something that is holy, pure and perfect. By contrast praising God helps us realize that we are not holy, pure and perfect.

This is an incomplete list but I hope that you start to get a sense of “why” we are to praise God. God doesn’t not need the praise, however, we need to praise God. And, we need to do it a lot.

Here is a beautiful example of praising God in a Celtic poem by Calvin Miller. The poem is called “Creation Praise.”

I offer Thee
Every wave that ever moved,
Every heart that ever loved,
Thee, my Father's Well-Beloved,
Dear Lord.

Every River Dashing,
Every lightning flashing,
Like the angel's sword.
Benedicimus Te!

I offer Thee Every Cloud that ever swept
O'er the skies and broke and wept
In rain, and with the flowerlets slept.
My king.

Each communicant praying,
Every angel staying
Before Thy throne to sing.
Adoramus Te!

I offer Thee
Every flake of virgin snow,
Every spring of earth below,
Every human joy and woe,
My love!

O Lord! And all the glorious
Self o'er death victorious,
Throned in heaven above.
Glorificamus Te!

We have a lot of reasons to praise God, and we need to do it often.

Now, earlier I was using praise and thanks as synonyms. I think that praise and thanksgiving are very related to one another, but they are not exactly the same thing.

Part of our praise of God is because we are thankful for so many things that God has done for us. We are blessed in ways that we know but also in ways that we don't know. We praise God for our many blessings.

However, we are also called to praise God in those time that we are not feeling grateful. Sometimes God answers our prayer with a "no". And, while I am in the midst of it, it is a big stretch for me to say that I am thankful for those "no's".

The end of an important relationship

Death, destruction and violence in Gaza and Lebanon.

Lack of clean water

Poor mental health, especially when it is chronic.

There are many circumstances in life that can cause us to be upset with God.

Sometimes it seems like we are to be mindless automatons that keep being happy and grateful during some pretty lousy times. Maybe the cherubim flying around the throne can keep singing praises, but it can be hard to sing praises and be grateful during some of the awful times of life.

So, I think praise and thanks are related but they aren't totally the same. For, in the low times of life, in those times in which I don't feel grateful, I can still praise God.

I can praise God for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. I can praise God for being present with me. I can praise God for beauty.

Sometimes we say that praise of God is the caboose on the train of life. It follows when things in life go well. I think the better image is that praise of God is the engine of the train of life. Praise powers life and takes the train to new places. Praise can help us change our life. We should be praising God throughout our days, and certainly in our Sunday morning worship. We need to be persistent in our praise of God throughout the zigzags of life, so that other point to us and say "I want what they have. How can I get it?"

As I started this sermon, I talked about our singing of the Doxology. Many of you know that the definition of doxology is hymn of praise to God. Our worship of God would be empty and hollow without praise of God – lots of praise of God.

So, if we ever have a season in which we don't sing the Doxology before the Eucharist, you can be assured that we will have lots of other opportunities in that worship service to praise God. You might notice that today's worship has more than three dozen moments in which we are praising God. So, let's add a few more.

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.