

**6 Epiphany, Year A (RCL)**  
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Worship is a central part of our life together here at St. Peter's. It gives shape to much of what we do here. Why, however, do we worship? What is the purpose of worship? Why does it matter for you and for me to take part in worship? Aren't there other things we could be doing than taking part in worship?

This morning at the Adult Forum I will be exploring this topic in greater detail. But for now, let's think about this briefly together.

The word worship comes from the Old English word "worthship." In Old English culture a person of great wealth was often addressed as "your worthship" or "your worship." Gradually the term began to be used more and more to refer to the value and respect that we give to God, who is the source of all worth and to whom alone we are to give our ultimate respect and loyalty.

The story of the Bible is the story of God wanting to form a people who will love God and whom God can love in return. The books of the Old Testament tell of God's relationship with a particular people, the people of Israel. Israel is called by God to be God's chosen people, a people to whom much is given but also from whom much is expected. God makes them an offer. I will be your God if you will be my people. But I must be your only God. You cannot give worth to other gods—you cannot worship other gods. God, in other words, demands the fidelity of the people of Israel.

The story of the Bible is also the story of a people who struggle to keep that covenant. The very name of God's covenant people is Israel, which means "he who struggles or wrestles with God." Originally the name was given to the patriarch Jacob, but that same name was taken by the people as their collective name. Israel, in other words, is a people who struggle to keep the covenant they have made with God.

The rules of the covenant that God made with the people of Israel are found in the Torah given by God to the people of Israel. The Torah means much more than law, even though it is full of all kinds of regulations. The Torah in its largest sense outlines a way of life. It illuminates the path of faithfulness for all who seek to keep the covenant that God made with Israel.

In our reading from Psalm 119 this morning we read these words: ¶

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.

Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart....

Literally it reads, "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the *Torah* of the LORD."

When we come to our gospel reading this morning we encounter Jesus talking to his own people about the Torah, and about its observance. Jesus' words have a context. It

is important to take explicit notice of that. The context helps us avoid a literalist reading that seems rather harsh to our ear accustomed to a more gentle and kindly Jesus. In our gospel reading this morning from the gospel of Matthew, Jesus addresses the topics of murder, adultery, divorce, and the swearing of oaths—along with a few other issues.

The discussion of each of these is introduced by the words, "You have heard it said." Here Jesus is referring to what it says in the Torah about a specific topic. Jesus then says, "but I say to you." Then he gives a new interpretation of the meaning of the selected passage. It might at first seem that Jesus is talking much like a rabbi would have talked in first century Palestine. And he was. But for Matthew, Jesus is doing much more than that. Remember that Jesus has gone up the mountain and now is delivering his new interpretation of the law from the mountain. Jesus is giving what Christians call the "Sermon on the Mount." Matthew wants us to see and understand Jesus as the new Moses. Where Moses went up on the mountain and received the Torah from God, so Jesus went up on the mountain and gave a new interpretation of the Torah.

If you look closely at what Jesus says he does not seem to make observing the Torah any easier. Jesus, for example, says, "you have heard it said that you shall not commit adultery, but I say to you that if so much as look at a person with lust you have already committed adultery." "You have heard it said that you shall not murder but I say to you that if you are angry with your brother or sister you are liable for judgment." Doesn't that mean that most everyone is an adulterer, that most everyone is a murderer? In some ways Jesus seems to be even more demanding than what the Law of Moses requires. Why is that? Why does Jesus seem so harsh here?

The answer to this question, in my opinion, can be supplied by the larger context of Jesus' words. Many of Jesus' hearers, the Pharisees included, were convinced that they kept the law perfectly. Many of the men who heard Jesus' words had never murdered anyone. They also had never committed adultery. When they examined themselves they were sure that they were doing all that the law required: they kept the ritual purity demanded of them, they did not do what they were not supposed to do, they made the required sacrifices and gave their tithes to God. As a result they thought that they were just fine in the eyes of God and that they had no need for repentance. They in their own minds were keeping the law perfectly.

Jesus, however, is not looking at the letter of the law but the spirit of the law. And that must have been a radical departure from what Jesus' hearers understood about the responsibility they had in relation to the covenant, the Torah that God gave to the people of Israel.

Matthew presents to us a Jesus who still keeps Torah. He presents to us a Jesus who asks his followers to keep Torah. This is not the kind of Christianity that we know today. The form of Christianity that gradually emerged and became dominant was that of Pauline Christianity. St. Paul changed what might have remained a small Jewish sect into a movement that changed the face of the ancient Jewish and Gentile worlds. It is a movement and way of life that still transforms people today. We are a part of that movement. Paul, himself an observant Jew, helped Christians understand that we do not

justify ourselves to God by a detailed observance of the Torah. Rather it is God who justifies us by God's grace. We are saved by grace, not by our works. We are saved by God's actions towards us and not by our own actions.

We at St. Peter's are a community who seeks to respond to God's call to us. We as our mission statement reminds us are a people who are "called together in Christ, transformed by God's grace, [and] sent out to serve." We come together in community so that God can transform us. The transformation that God helps bring about in our lives is not for ourselves alone. Once transformed, we are called to minister to and serve others, as Jesus did.

We are a people who value community. Over the 50 years of our history St. Peter's has been a people that wants to welcome and include people in its community. Community is one of the things that we value most. For those who have been here for a while that community seems natural. For those who have joined us more recently that sense of inclusion in a loving community may not yet have become fully realized. We are committed to making St. Peter's a place of welcome for all people. There is still work to do to make this community and our facilities welcoming to those who come to us and who seek to become part of our community. There is work to do but we are working in many areas to be responsive to the needs of those who already are a part of our community and of those who are not yet here. This is an exciting time to be a part of the community at St. Peter's.

We are a people continually striving to be faithful to God's call to us. But God calls each of us to do his or her part to build up the body of Christ here in this place.

I urge you to be faithful to the God who calls you into community and to the God who invites your worship, your love, and your devotion. Our Psalm reading this morning says it all:

"Happy are those who...seek God with their whole heart" (Psalm 119:2).

"Happy are those who...seek God with their whole heart."

Come let us worship the Lord! Alleluia!

*Amen.*