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“What Leads To and From Praise”

The sixteenth century reformer, Martin Luther, was asked to give an account of what true worship looks like, and he said: "Worship is the tenth leper turning back." He is of course referencing this story Jesus is telling in Luke chapter 17, about the healed outcast, who, leaving the pack, turns back in gratitude, and becomes the poster person of thanksgiving. Yet, what makes this account of worship something worth paying any attention to? Nothing in this scene is, in fact, outside the pattern of how healing stories usually play out.

Original hearers of this Gospel would have been very familiar with the story of Naaman from their Scriptures. In the Old Testament book of 2 Kings, Naaman too was a leper in need of healing. Now, Naaman was the commander of the Syrian army and a respected military leader, so the opposite of someone who was cast-out from society. Yet, he was not above the community-destroying and life-threatening disease that was leprosy. As we know, human ailments pay no attention to social positioning. Naaman, knowing the weight of his situation, visits the prophet Elisha and ultimately obeys the prophet's instruction to wash himself seven times in the Jordan River, which restores his flesh to that of a child. He then praises the God of Israel as the only true God and vows to serve God only. He even returns to Elisha and begs him to take payment for healing him.

The diseased seeking healing, obey a healer's command, receive their healing, and return in praise and gratitude—that's a tale as old as time. In Luke's Gospel, everything here seems to follow a traditional, law-abiding pattern. So then, Jesus' questioning, seems a bit disingenuous, doesn't it? "Were not ten made clean? But where are the other nine? After all, the group was simply following his advice to go and show themselves to the priests, according to the custom of the law. So, what do you mean, where are the others, Jesus? They were just following your advice and doing as *you* said?" His unusual

question should tip us off that there is in this something else to pay attention to.

We are told the returning one was a Samaritan. To emphasize this, Jesus calls him a “foreigner”. In other words: the last person a first-century Jew would take as any example of orthodoxy—in the Greek, *ortho* meaning “right, or true” and *doxa* meaning “praise, glory, or belief”. A Samaritan was anything but orthodox or an example to follow. Jews and Samaritans disagreed, often bitterly, over matters of theology and worship. And here, it was this Samaritan who actually disobeys Jesus. While the others are off to see the priests to be officially restored to the community, this one turns back. And not only is he headed in the wrong direction, when he reaches Jesus, he breaks code. After years of remaining ostracized and keeping his distance, he throws himself at Jesus’ feet. And yet, there’s something we are to see in this act that is restorative in a different key than just the physical.

If it’s not ironic, it’s poetic. It’s the immigrant, the outsider, who sees what is taken for granted by the others. The others perhaps are accustomed to kindness, expecting of mercy. It’s the one who takes notice and sees this pure gift of healing and belonging. More than ever, we still need the view and voice of those out on the margins so the rest of us might not miss what can be taken for granted.

Jesus tells the Samaritan, “Your faith has made you well.” Other translations say: “Your faith has healed and saved you.” Or, “...has made you whole.” The word *sesoken*, from the root *sozo*, is translated to mean healed, made well, rescued, preserved, delivered. There is in this a qualitative transformation by addition, above the physical, routine healing that the other nine had themselves received. Ten lepers were healed, the Greek word *katharizo*, but only one was transformed and made whole, *sesoken*.

We, placing ourselves in the position as ones who also stand in need of healing, are to learn from this that faith is not a matter of right belief and following religious customs, but the spiritual practice of seeing. You see, prior to praise, prior to prostration and effusive thanksgiving, only one of them saw... “Then one of them, when *he saw* that he was healed, turned back...”

Seeing disturbs the *ho hum* that is religious expectation and breaks something open within him that causes him to break from the custom of the crowd. I read in this that worship proceeds from seeing, and always in that order, that praise is provisional and hinges on a person’s posture to even take

notice in the first place. And truer to the point of the passage, to see Jesus for who he actually is.

The way I see it, we don't have a worship problem in the capital-C Church, we have a seeing problem. It isn't that Christians aren't praising loud enough or boldly enough; It's that our praise is hollowed (with an -o), not hallowed (with an -a), when it is not the outpouring of those who have first been transfixed and transformed by seeing the true Christ.

The divine condemnation from the Old Testament prophet still rings loudly from the pages of Amos chapter 5 (21-24):

"I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

The people had a seeing problem. And no matter how hard and loud they worshiped, missing the heart of the God of justice, just made it empty and meaningless.

Minister and author, Ronald Farmer, further critiques this vision-problem. He writes, "Most Christians are aware of the danger of 'rendering to Caesar things that belong to God,' but the danger of 'rendering to God things that belong to Caesar,' is often overlooked." He goes on to say: "This error occurs whenever people conceive of God in terms of Caesar, in essence creating God in Caesar's image, only 'bigger.'" If our conception of God is one of coercive, controlling, unilateral power such as Caesar, then worshiping such a God will color our "understanding of power on the human level." So, I find a formula at play here: The way we see God influences our worship, and our worship of the God we see colors how we see the world. But this all proceeds from our vision of the divine.

If you conceive of a God that is unconditionally loving—the very essence of love itself—and the height of that love as expressed through the self-sacrificial life, ministry, and death of Jesus on the cross... then you will see others from

that version of power—Not a top-down power-over, but one that comes alongside of, comes underneath to hold up, and gives up for the sake of others. And your vision of God will play out wherever power dynamics are at play: With you employees at work, in the way you parent, how you treat the immigrant, the poor, the stranger.

Christian Nationalists are some of the most religious people, it's just that their conception of God looks nothing like Jesus, and therefore looks nothing like true Christianity. It's not for lack of passion; It's a vision problem.

It has become monotonous these days to say that we are living in unprecedented times. Jesus is asking us with a heightened sense of urgency to see and take notice. When we continually return to praise the God of justice, we cannot help but give ourselves to justice-making and peacemaking in our communities. God's character is contagious in that way. When we praise the God of radical love, we cannot help but give ourselves to the work of equality and LGBTQIA protections and rights. The way we see, colors our way of being in the world.

I wonder, among us here, how are we seeing these days? This is not so much a theological question than one that concerns our attention. Has our religion merely grown accustomed to kindness, to compassion, so that it no longer moves us to praise and thanksgiving? Are we just that pretty church on the corner of Fort Lee Road and Leonia Avenue simply going along with the religious customs of our day? Now, I've been around you long enough to know that you are not that type. But the lure to fall back asleep is always enticing.

I've seen your worship and it isn't merely loud noise. I believe it comes from hearts that truly want to be the presence of God in the world. But the temptation to let church be just about this building tempts us every time we gather for worship on Sunday. My prayer for you, and me, is to be the ones that take notice and often turn back to praise and give thanks. May it be so.