

“Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”

Scripture

Revelation 4:1-11, 5:11-14 (NRSV)

1 After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." **2** At once I was in the spirit, ^{F13} and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! **3** And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. **4** Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. **5** Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; **6** and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: **7** the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.

8 And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come." **9** And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, **10** the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, **11** "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, **12** singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" **13** Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" **14** And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" And the elders fell down and worshiped.

Scripture

Matthew 5:3 (NRSV)

3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

In the desert community of Scottsdale, Arizona, Pastor Eric Elnes had made tremendous inroads with the youth of his church by having what he called the World's Most Dangerous Bible Study, otherwise known as a WMDBS. He attracted them by droves, and in part because he also mixed the Bible study in with the youths' music. "Yet despite our youths' newfound enthusiasm for seemingly everything having to do with church, there was one place where they absolutely would not go. Worship." The frustration of this led Eric to ponder more deeply the nature of worship. Asking this question in a time away from the church, as he sat by a lake, "the largest bass he had ever seen swam past, leaving the water rippling in its wake. 'I stood up, and gasped as a sense of awe and wonder provoked a surge of adrenaline through my whole body,' he said." And then he saw it. "This is the foundation of worship. If you can take an hour on Sunday morning and open people to experiencing just a quarter-second of awe, wonder and surrender like you just experienced, it is accomplished."

With a different kind of music, Charles Wesley followed the same logic when he penned the last phrase in his classic hymn: "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." The vision was no doubt inspired by John's heavenly vision in the Book of Revelation with twenty-four elders and the four living creatures, with myriads and myriads of angels gathered around God's throne in heaven singing ceaselessly, day and night: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come." Wesley's version, of course, has all of us before the throne of God, singing "lost in wonder, love and praise."

As colorful and dramatic as is the vision of worship presented in the Book of Revelation, I must admit at least at present that I prefer Wesley's way of expressing worship to God. I don't merely want a heavenly picture. I want to participate in the experience myself. I don't want to hear a report. I want to be there and join in. Perhaps that's what the youth of Eric Elnes' church and Charles Wesley have in common. Their awe, their experience of wonder, of love, of praise is also necessary to worship – not because they are important, but because the presence, the character, and the majesty of God does not allow any to be merely bystanders, observers, outsiders. The one who is the source of life, its generous giver, is a compelling magnet to what of God's holiness and beauty and goodness that is in us, that is in the whole creation.

Now seeing that Eric Elnes' church is in Scottsdale, Arizona, one must also put up a word of caution. His Scottsdale Congregational United Church of Christ ended up having expressive worship in both contemporary and traditional forms. Whether with classical music or contemporary it was the eye toward God which made the difference. But being in desert, where they are acquainted with oases, they remembered that as often as not, spied from a distance an oasis often turned out to be a mirage. I hazard a guess that we harbor such cautions about worship. Will we get there thirsty for the paradise that seems promised and find sand? Having made such an analogy, however, I would also say that perhaps the key isn't the oasis. Rather, it is our thirst.

If you think about it, the question about worship is not whether it fits our tastes so much as what whether it fits what is needful. When Charles Wesley gets "lost in wonder, love and praise," he isn't writing to pen beautiful lyrics. He's describing his worship of the God in whose realm he is blessed to live and have his being. He is describing the blessing of one who is poor in spirit.

When Jesus blesses those who are poor in spirit, saying that theirs is the kingdom of God, I believe that he is saying something about worship – but about worship in a particular kind of way. In Luke's Gospel by comparison, this beatitude is expressed a hair differently. There, Jesus says only "blessed are the poor" for theirs is the kingdom of God. "Poor" and "poor in spirit" convey two different things to me. One describes one's economic condition. The other is almost a confession of the wrong of one's conceit.

Actually, it might be more suitable to describe Matthew's "poor in spirit" and Luke's "just plain poor," as two sides of the same coin. In describing the good news of the blessing that Jesus is after in both Matthew and Luke, Walter Brueggemann has asked us to see in them an alternative way of thinking. Blessing is "an alternative to self-sufficiency, self-indulgence, to self-invention," he says. On self-sufficiency he says: "What I've learned about myself and those I know is that the more sufficient you feel, the less convinced you are that you are sufficient. It's an endless rat race and if you win it, you're a rat." In light of this, we need to reframe the story we tell about ourselves and about God's world. Echoing the words of Wesley's hymn, he offers this invitation. "In our time of insanity and brutality, we must recover the nerve to frame our present moment of anxiety around the mystery of creation and inscrutable wonder that our lives

are grounded in God's exuberant generosity and with it the promise of well-being."

"The framing says that life is a gift not a possession. It says that our lives are penultimate, not ultimate." And as much as we can find ourselves giddy in blessing, in worship as those who get "lost in wonder, love and praise," we should also remember that the hymn articulates a mission, as well. Luke's beatitude for simply "the poor," articulates the missional quality of the worship we are called to. It finds us participating in the exuberant generosity of God and God's promise of well-being through our love for our neighbor, as well. The alternative frame for our stories remembers how God's love for the world was revealed most significantly in the person of Jesus, who ventured into the vulnerability of the human condition, and who invites those worshipping God into that human condition calling us to live as Jesus did. It is this Jesus who understood that the neighbor is the epicenter of the Gospel. It is this Jesus who spoke truth to power, who bent social institutions to serve human need, who practiced his life with children and widows and orphans and other valueless non-producers, who called Rome into question and offered alternative governance, who argued with the other rabbis for the sake of telling good news, who taught poetically so that he would not be slotted ideologically as a conservative or a liberal. It is this Jesus, who embodied God's vulnerability, God's edgy attentiveness in the world, God's crash course on newness that summons us."

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Indeed, to see not only that we are the recipients of God exuberant generosity and promises of well-being but also that we can live out of such blessing is to worship the one whose divine love we can describe as all loves excelling. Amen.