

A Rendering of Praise

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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For six weeks, a dozen of us – as many as thirteen – have gathered on Thursday evenings for conversations on Personality Type and Spirituality. Using the Myers Briggs Type Indicator® as a starting point, we have openly shared with each other a better understanding of “what makes us tick” the way we do, why we tend to see and respond to the world as we do ... what our personalities reflect when we are rested, when we are in our “shoes off” condition and, perhaps, how we think, feel and interpret life when we are stressed, tired, or pushed to our emotional limits.

For better or worse, I am the epitome of my type. On two occasions, Bre Evans, one with a preference for intuition, has, probably speaking for the rest of the class members, has blurted out after I have read certain characteristics of my type – “Oh, like Ralph!” Now, lest one think that impolite on her part ... I set the tone by inviting persons to be spontaneous and candid in the safe environment of faithful persons gathered to discover a little more about who they are, why they emote as they do and to discover a bit about the spiritual journey their personality type invites them to pursue and embrace.

This past Thursday, we were able to dig into the sixteen basic personality types and the manner in which persons *might* prefer to pray and render praise to their God. As ever with the MBTI®, we discovered a great variety among the sixteen types – and remembered again that the

strength of the church of Jesus Christ is to be found more in the diversity of talents, energy and spiritual journeys than on some litmus-tested insistence on uniformity, the “believe, worship, pray and act this way and only this way” perspective of so many who fear individuality and self-expression lest it work against some specific “norm.”

In our sessions we had already discussed what we have come to name the different spiritual journeys some of us tend to embrace. While some persons indeed are able to reach a better level of self-actualization than others, work and serve in more than one particular way, most of us find ourselves in one of the four basic journey “types:” the journey of unity, devotion, works or harmony. [based on the work of The Rev. Peter Tufts Richardson’s **Four Spiritualities: Expressions of Self, Expressions of Spirit: A Psychology of Contemporary Spiritual Choice**]

My thesis this morning is that when it comes to what we would render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s, all else falls into place when we praise God as we ought. I am sure there are clergy this morning who will, appropriately I suppose, use this passage as a way of reminding persons that not only is it important to pay ones taxes (the rendering to the emperor part) as one *must* – but that it is important to render to God through ones participation in the mission and ministry of the one the church what one should want to contribute. Rendering to God includes ones time, energy and talent, but also, to be blunt, finances so that the church can do the work of which we should be so proud.

Jesus talks about money, about putting “treasure” where ones heart dwells – confirming that we will contribute much of who and what we are for those things we enjoy, that capture our spirit, that grab us, entice us and about which we want to be a part. As a few of my colleagues on the Conference Ministry Team of the New York Conference of the United Church of Christ (with The Rev. Marian Shearer present in worship this morning, two of the eleven of us are here this morning) ... we spoke this past week about how we as Christians and specifically the United Church of Christ need to make sure that we are not sounding as though we are apologizing when we ask for the support of our churches and our members. We need to express that we, led by the Spirit, are doing God’s work on earth, are about mission and justice and grace and reconciliation and peace – and are proud of that work and want others to join in what stirs us, inspires us and motivates us as people of the good news of Jesus the Christ!

All else falls into place when we render to God the praise that God is due! Listen to just two – admittedly quite contrasting – two of the sixteen ways that Scripture and in this case some of the Psalms affirm the diversity in how one renders praise to God. For example, for the ESFPs (like me) – the persons who prefer extraversion, sensing, feeling and perception,

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” (Psalm 19:1)

Even more appropriate from the last of the Psalms, Psalm 150:

Praise God with trumpet sound; praise God with lute and harp!

Praise God with tambourine and dance; praise God with strings and pipe!

Praise God with clanging cymbals; praise God with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

I have related before how Herr Salzberger, my organ instructor in Frankfurt, Germany, was concerned that I only knew how to play loud, louder and loudest, for I enjoyed the marvelous, sense pleasing, yes loud, sound I could produce on the organ at the Frauenfriedens Church. Had we discussed “type,” he might have affirmed that the Psalms also include these words:

“Be still and know that I am God” from the tenth verse of the 46th Psalm

..... [moment of silence]

The dichotomy between “loud” praise and quiet reflection notwithstanding, there are some other dichotomies, that is sharp and contrasting differences, that we need to consider when it comes to the praise we render – the praise of and to God if not the “praise” we render to others or hear ourselves.

Most of us realize that praise can be

- faint or genuine,
- flash in the pan or enduring,
- shallow or deep-seated,
- exaggerated or deserved

While we might wonder about the agenda or intent of the one giving or rendering the praise, I think one can tell the difference when praise seems rote, automatic if not forced, as opposed to genuine and born of real appreciation. That speaks to whether our praise of God – in word, in worship, in how we respond (or not) to the needs of others, in our stewardship of time, talent and yes, the money part again – whether the praise seems forced or comes naturally from the depth of a person’s soul and mind.

Back to this past Wednesday, when the Conference Ministry Team met in Syracuse: There was a side-bar conversation when you, Marian, were speaking about “praise” and how we need to learn what words can be helpful and which ones can, while perhaps intended to compliment, can be disabling if not undercutting of another. I think I paraphrase one of your lines when you spoke of the person who says to one child “How wonderfully you play the violin, you must have inherited all of the musical talent in your family.” Our first reaction might be, “what on earth is wrong with some saying that?” However, what is the reaction of a sibling of that talented

violinist who hears that and at some deep level interprets that to mean that if this sister or brother has *all* of the musical talent in the family than this other one must have none. Now stop before you think that psychological gobbeldy-gook. Words matter and children, if not all of us, “hear” with ears and hearts!

Just as words of praise can have a greater impact than we may think, so can words of criticism. I know that elementary school teachers who expressed dismay at how I worked with glue prevented me from ever feeling comfortable with glue – well into adulthood. It was not until Sally insisted that I try and put down a tile floor in the three-season room in our house in Rochester than I even began to overcome my feelings of inadequacy when it comes to adhesive. (This past Thursday, we spoke about the five senses in the context of which is most closely related to memory. Three members of the class immediately responded to my question by putting their index fingers on their noses. To give an example of how I agreed with their answer, I shared how all I need do is smell an adhesive for feelings of inadequacy to make their way into my head and soul if not overwhelm me.)

So, how much better it might have been in the example of which Marian spoke to simply affirm how well a youngster played a particular piece of music. “I really enjoyed how you played that piece!” is just as affirming while not disabling another.

One other comment about praise Marian shared had as much to do with a person’s reaction to praise as it did the intent of the person rendering it. Once again, I share a personal example. Some of you have found my reaction odd when you have said something like “that was a really good sermon this morning.” While it might have been more helpful had there been some specifics – “I really liked how you tied those two ideas together” or, “I admit I never looked at that subject that way before,” *my* reaction, while cause for Sally to shake her head in dismay, is *to wonder why this sermon merited a compliment as opposed to the one the week before*. One time I, in my self-deprecating way once replied to someone “Oh, as opposed to last week’s sermon?” Groan – they groaned. I groaned – *and neither of us felt good about the exchange*.

We are a people called upon to render to God praise that is due our God. In like manner, we are invited to praying with and to God in the manner that fits us. But finally, we render praise and pray not because we must, but because we may, not because it is our duty, but because we are a people of the good news of Jesus the Christ, not because it is our obligation, but because we are a people led by the Spirit to render to our Creating, Redeeming and Ever-Powerful God what our hearts and souls and minds and strength give us no choice but to render.

With all that we are, we render our praise. To that may the people of God reply with Amen.

Amen.