

“Beyond Maintenance”  
Based on Matthew 14: 22-33 and  
Great Ends of the Church: Maintenance of Divine Worship  
by Rev. Meghan Davis, Longview Presbyterian Church  
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As today’s Gospel passage begins Jesus sends the disciples off in a boat and dismisses the crowds who thwarted his previous attempt to find some privacy and solitude. Jesus needs to get away from it all. Alone, Jesus goes up a mountain to pray. As Jesus prays through the night, the disciples’ boat is taken away from the shore by harsh conditions. So when morning comes, Jesus does what anyone would do in that situation: he starts walking out over the water toward the boat.

But, of course, that’s not what “anyone” would do. The disciples’ terror indicates it’s not even something Jesus had done before, at least, not around them. They think he’s a ghost and cry out in fear. Jesus says, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” And I can’t help but wonder just how he said it. Was it a comforting and assuring, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid,”? Or was it, as I imagine, a somewhat more exasperated, “Oh for goodness sake. Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid,”?

Either way, Peter takes matters into his own hands. He’s going to settle this by getting him to prove that he is Jesus. Peter says, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” And Peter clearly has a lot of faith in Jesus. Because the command itself is not what proves that the individual is Jesus. After all, if it *were* a ghost, wouldn’t the ghost be just as capable of giving the command? No, it’s not the *command* that proves Jesus’ identity. It’s Peter’s ability to obey the command. So Jesus obliges and tells Peter, “Come.” Come step out of the boat. Walk on water. You can do it. It’s easy.

So Peter obeys the command. Like a cartoon character running far out over a cliff and not falling until he notices that he’s run out over the cliff, Peter steps out of the boat and starts walking but then he notices the strong wind, gets scared and begins to sink. He calls out, “Lord, save me!” And Jesus immediately reaches out his hand to catch him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

This passage is often treated as one about faith and doubt. The common interpretation being that Peter’s weak faith, his doubt, is what causes him to sink. But I think that interpretation is backwards. Peter’s doubt is displayed in the first thing he says, “*if* it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” *If*. Peter tests Jesus. Not unlike others testing Jesus throughout the gospels: Satan testing Jesus in the wilderness, those at his crucifixion testing him saying, if you are who you say you are, save yourself. Not unlike the prayers of some to this day, “God, if you exist, do \_\_\_\_\_” or “God if you help me by doing \_\_\_\_\_ I’ll start going to church” or “I’ll never ask for anything again” or any other deal.

But it is Peter’s faith that takes him out over the boat’s edge and onto the water. It is Peter’s faith that allows him to take a few steps. Sure, he gets distracted by the strong wind and probably by the very fact that he is walking on water just as a kid learning to ride a bike might fall after a few good seconds of riding has soon as she realizes that she’s actually riding a bike. (Haven’t we all been distracted in similar situations? Haven’t we all been distracted in our faith?) And Peter begins to sink. He doesn’t sink. He *begins* to sink. I don’t know about you, but my experience with water is that you don’t “begin to sink” you just “sink.” But this sounds like he was sinking slowly, as one might slowly sink in mud. Could it be that Peter’s faith was strong enough to keep him from sinking like a stone?

Because the next thing that happens is Peter's declaration of faith: "Lord, save me!" Peter confesses Jesus as his Lord and savior.

In *The Cost of Discipleship* Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian imprisoned and later executed for denouncing the Nazi regime, analyzes Peter in this situation, "Peter had to leave the ship and risk his life on the sea, in order to learn both his own weakness and the almighty power of his Lord. If Peter had not taken the risk, he would never have learned the meaning of faith....The road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus. Unless a definite step is demanded, the call vanishes into thin air, and if [people] imagine that they can follow Jesus without taking this step, they are deluding themselves like fanatics."<sup>1</sup> When is Peter in doubt? He doubts *before* he takes the first step. But he took the risk, he took the step despite his doubt. And in beginning to sink he confesses Jesus as Lord and savior.

Then when it's all over, and Jesus and Peter are safely back in the boat, the disciples worship Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." Peter's faith is made whole in risking obedience. Obedience continues through communal worship. Which, of course, brings us to this week's Great End of the Church: Maintenance of Divine Worship.

Howard Rice, a former moderator of our denomination and former chaplain of San Francisco Theological Seminary begins his book on this Great End of the Church, with the declaration: "Whatever else a church does, worship is at the very heart of its life. A congregation can have a fine educational program, do good works in the community, be active in support of missionaries, and provide a wonderful sense of fellowship for its members, but if worship is not at the very center of its life, it is not a church in the fullest sense. Because worship is rooted in the most basic of all human needs—our need for God—worship is basic to what it means to be human."<sup>2</sup>

The Psalmist instructs us to "remember." Worship reminds us who we are and whose we are. In worship we are reminded of these invaluable truths: God loves us, God forgives us, and God calls us to obediently respond to God's love. Maintenance of Divine Worship is the only Great End that makes zero sense without God.

This was NPR's Scott Simon commentary last week:

"It's not just politicians who have their every act and utterance run through a wringer of polls, pundits, analysis and ratings.

"Public Policy Polling, a Democratic polling firm, asked 928 people, "If God exists, do you approve or disapprove of its performance?"

"Holding your breath?"

"Fifty-two percent said that they approved. Nine percent disapproved.

"If you take this poll seriously, that would put God's approval rating slightly above that of President Obama, who has a 47-percent approval rating in the last Gallup Poll, and well ahead of the 33-percent approval rating both Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. Congress received in the latest Associated Press poll.

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Macmillian Co., 1960), 53-60

<sup>2</sup> Howard L. Rice, Jr., *Maintenance of Divine Worship*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Witherspoon Press, 2006), 1.

“But God lags 8 points behind Oprah Winfrey. She had a 60-percent favorable rating in a Fox News poll this spring. Of course, Oprah hands out cars, popcorn and cruises. God metes out blights, hurricanes and floods — in addition to sunrise, spring flowers and puppies.

“God earns His or Her — I can’t bring myself to say ‘it,’ as the poll does — highest scores for creating the universe.

“So the universe wasn’t created by an iPhone app, although as of this morning, Apple reportedly has more cash on hand than the U.S. Treasury.

“Seventy-two percent say that they approve of God creating the universe. Twenty-four percent say they’re ‘not sure.’ Could Woody Allen account for 24 percent?

“The poll says that 50 percent approve of God’s handling of natural disasters, 13 percent disapprove, and 37 percent say ‘Not Sure,’ which is what I would say until the pollster made it clear if natural disasters include the Chicago Cubs.

“I am not sure what the purpose of this poll is, except to snag a little publicity, which it obviously has here. I can’t imagine pollsters believe in a God who will read their data like a politician and say, ‘Those numbers are a little soft. How can we spin the Sodom and Gomorrah story?’

“Believers and atheists might agree: If there is a God, the Almighty should carve commandments in stone, not spin.

“But this poll reminded me about part of what I often distrust about polls. They rarely reflect *how* people really think. Many of us can hold subtle, tangled and contradictory views, especially about God, faith and life. People lose, find and question faith all the time. Real life can put a dent in your deepest beliefs and convictions. It’s part of what keeps us growing and changing, even as we grow older. Asking people to check a box ‘Approve’ or ‘Disapprove’ just narrows our thinking when it gets truly interesting.

“I think I’d be a little more impressed by a poll that could discover not if people approve or disapprove of God’s performance, but the other way around.”<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not *we* approve of God is immaterial. As Simon says, the question isn’t whether people approve or disapprove of God’s performance, but the other way around. And the same is true about worship. Worship isn’t about us. It’s about God and our relationship with God.

Our Psalm<sup>4</sup> this morning sets the stage for Maintenance of Divine Worship:  
O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name,  
make known God’s deeds among the peoples.  
Sing to God, sing praises to God;

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<sup>3</sup> Scott Simon, “New Poll Can’t Spin God’s Mystery,” NPR, July 30, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/07/30/138850809/gods-polling-power>

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 105:1-6

tell of all God's wonderful works.  
Glory in God's holy name;  
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.  
Seek the Lord and God's strength;  
seek God's presence continually.  
Remember the wonderful works God has done,  
God's miracles, and the judgments God has uttered,  
O offspring of God's servant Abraham,  
children of Jacob, God's chosen ones.

Give thanks, make known, sing praises, glory in God's holy name, seek God, remember... The primary actions of worship: Give thanks, make known, sing praises, glory in God's holy name, seek God, remember...

Worship is not: entertainment, not about having a meaningful experience, not about being inspired, not to make us feel good, not to make us "better people," not to fill us up or bring meaning to our lives. Of course, any of those things may be a welcome by-product of worship. But worship is about *God*. "We gather to worship God, not ourselves, our nation, our ideals, not our splendid sense of family, not our achievements or our plans."<sup>5</sup> Worship that is not about God, worship that falls into the trap of becoming entertainment or somehow about *us* instead of about God, is not *Divine* worship and therefore has no place in the church.

In today's gospel are examples of both individual worship—Jesus praying in solitude—and public worship—the disciples worshipping Jesus on the boat. For a well-formed, mature faith, a balance between personal faith practice and public worship is necessary. Rice points out that vital though personal prayer and devotion is, "public worship keeps our private devotions from becoming self-centered."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, "If we worship only in public, we risk becoming shallow in our devotional life, and worship becomes a formality to be repeated without much heart in it. To skip private worship is to shortchange our spiritual lives and freight public worship far too much. By itself, one hour or a little more a week simply cannot sustain us in faith for the trials and duties of life."<sup>7</sup>

Recalling Bonhoeffer's statement about the necessity for Peter's faith to be acted on by taking the risky step, Bonhoeffer goes on to write, "Faith is only real where there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience."<sup>8</sup> Faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience. And how do we live out our faithful obedience? In many ways but chief among them: the maintenance of divine worship.

But what does maintenance mean? In our time, it may seem a peculiar word choice. "Maintenance" may seem like a desperate attempt to keep something from falling apart or fixing something that is already broken down. It may seem like "preservation" with a sense of keeping it the exactly the same. But it's not either of those things. It's not about keeping worship sealed away, preserved for all time like an ancient artifact in an airtight case in a museum. Maintenance of divine worship, like maintaining any other relationship or even maintaining our health, is about keeping it alive, vital and growing. It's about preserving the ancient tradition, and yet, we are Reformed and always being reformed by God. So we preserve the integrity of worship by transforming it as

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<sup>5</sup> Howard L. Rice, Jr., *Maintenance of Divine Worship*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Witherspoon Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Macmillian Co., 1960), 53-60

necessary for the people of God to see the connections between faith and life, between themselves and the Creator. But more importantly, we preserve the integrity of worship by allowing ourselves to be transformed by it.

In Divine worship, ancient tradition meets the contemporary reality forming a bridge between us and the cloud of witnesses, the saints from all the ages who join us every time we worship together and meet us here, at this table where we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Sealing God's Word. Here at this table, where we give thanks, make known God's deeds, sing praises, glory in God's holy name, seek God, and remember...