

## What is Worship All About?

Beloved people, what is worship all about? Our readings for this fifth Sunday after Epiphany encourage us to wonder **what inspires our worship, what good can come through worship, and how we might worship God more fully**. Let's begin this time of reflection with a moment of prayer: God, you are our ultimate source of empowering love and healing. Be with us in this time of wondering where you are with us in this tapestry of creation, this body of Christ – such that can hear to where we are called. Amen.

Friends, before moving into an exploration of **what inspires our worship, what good can come of it, and how we can worship God more fully**, let's take a moment to state what worship is. A dictionary will tell us that worship is the offering of our reverence and devotion to a divine power. In some basic reading on addiction and recovery, I have been moved by my exposure to the twelve step process that moors a support group. Step one is this: *"We admitted we were powerless over (a substance) – that our lives had become unmanageable."* That honest naming of a problem prepares the way for steps two and three: *"We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood it."*

Here is my own interpretation of steps one, two and three: The Love of God continually invites us to recognize that we are never alone and that we could not survive and thrive if we attempt to isolate ourselves from community. We are interconnected by belovedness woven throughout the tapestry of creation – the belovedness permeating the blood stream of the body of Christ (that is, creation as a whole).

In worship, we gather by the power of God's Love to re-member ourselves – gathering with other members for restoration toward sanity (that is health and wholeness).

This past week, during a monthly meeting with my spiritual director, I was reintroduced to a stunning brief blessing from Irish teacher and poet, John O'Donohue in this book *To Bless the Space Between Us*. It is entitled "To Come Home to Yourself."

*"May all that is unforgiven in you  
Be released.*

*May your fears yield  
Their deepest tranquilities.*

*May all that is unlived in you  
Blossom into a future  
Graced with love."*

This morning's message will largely be about worship as movement toward healing. As I read that blessing again, I invite you to prepare yourself by closing your eyes (if you are comfortable doing so) and **bringing to your heart mind a space in your life where healing is needed** (be it physical, mental, or spiritual healing). Hear these words of blessing for you:

*"May all that is unforgiven in you  
Be released.*

*May your fears yield  
Their deepest tranquilities.*

*May all that is unlived in you  
Blossom into a future  
Graced with love."*

Our readings for today from Hebrew scriptures prepare us to journey with Jesus toward deeper healing by encouraging us to surrender ourselves to worship of that loving God presence.

What inspires our worship? In the reading from Isaiah, I hear a call to worship as a response of awe and trust. We heard, *"Lift up your eyes and ask yourself who made these stars...?... God is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. This God does not faint or grow weary; with a depth of understanding that is unsearchable... Young women may grow tired and weary, young men may stumble and fall, but those who wait for God find a renewed power."* Words from the prophet Isaiah.

**I wonder: Will you continue to lift up your eyes to the stars in wonder, leaning with trust into the strength of a beautiful, unsearchable, renewing Love of God?**

What good can come through worship? I believe that the greatest good is that re-membering of ourselves into the tapestry of creation, the body of Christ. The Psalmist calls us to that awareness of our beloved interconnection. We heard these words, inspired by Psalm 147: *"For as we give ourselves to love, so we receive Love. The Beloved abides in our heart, in every open heart that welcomes Love... Awaken to your inheritance in all the universe! For you belong to heaven, to the stars and galaxies. You come also from the earth, from mineral and plant, pure water courses through your veins... And each human – in body or in spirit – welcomes you in the heart-song of Love, where we know we are all One Being."*

**I wonder: do we each hold the posture of our heart mind and our soul intuition open to reminders of our belovedness?** So much good can come from radical openness!

Speaking of radical openness to belovedness, let's turn to Jesus for a reminder of how to worship the Love of God with our lives.

I have wondered and now invite you to wonder with me: **Where in your life (in your private or our shared public life) is there an identifiable wound that needs healing? Can you envision what that wound would look like on the other side of healing? And what steps do we need to take to participate in healing of our wounds?**

While reflecting on today's scripture readings, I turned to my trusty dictionary to try to understand in some new way what we humans mean when we think, speak, write and sing about healing. Denotatively, healing is the process of becoming healthy again after a hurt or injury. This definition led me to wonder how the physical healing process plays out.

My quest led me to discover a very helpful description of four stages of healing on a blog called [woundsource.com](http://woundsource.com). The four stages of healing a physical wound are hemostasis, inflammatory, proliferative, and maturation.

In the **hemostasis** stage, clotting closes or seals a wound to restrict the blood flow. In the **inflammatory** stage, fluid engorgement controls bleeding and prevents infection by allowing healing and repair cells to more freely move to the site of the wound. In the **proliferative** stage, the wound contracts as the area is rebuilt out of new tissue and a new network of blood vessels.

In the **maturation** stage (which is also called the remodeling stage), the tissue that has been used for rebuilding transforms, aligning itself along tension lines, working in concert with water to help reduce scar thickness while strengthening the wounded area.

I am not a scientific minded person. So if your brain feels saturated by all of that scientific information, be assured that we will go through it slowly – one step at a time.

So how do the scriptures for today invite us into healing particular current wounds in our lives? In the gospel reading for this morning, Jesus stepped away from intense demands on his energy. He retreated to recharge between healing encounters with people.

We heard Mary read this: *“In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him.”* I wonder what Jesus experienced in those moments of solitude and prayer before his hunters found him.

In our congregation, when sharing together in the prayer Jesus taught us, we sometimes say these words: “And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Sometimes using the New Zealand version of the prayer, we express that petition in this way: “In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.” To forgive is to stop feeling angry or resentful. It has long been striking to me how Jesus was remembered for the times he would step away from the fray. He truly modeled for us the **hemostasis** phase of healing. Having absorbed the hurts of so many people as he extended compassion with them, he had the self-awareness to raise a stop sign and apply the brakes to restrict the emotional blood flow.

Only then would he have opportunity to recalibrate and reenergize for the work that was calling him.

**So if a particular wound in your private life or in our society has surfaced for you this morning, I wonder: have you tried stepping away, interrupting your normal behavior patterns in order to stop the bleeding for an extended moment?**

Let's consider how Jesus engaged in the **inflammatory** phase of healing.

It is powerful new information for me that the engorged fluid that constitutes inflammation has the power to control bleeding and prevent infection by allowing healing and repair cells to more freely move to the site of the wound. In other words, inflammation creates space for healing to occur. When Jesus would retreat into solitude and prayer, he likely felt more spacious. He could breathe more deeply and be more fully present to his feelings and thoughts ahead of moving on to his next encounter with fellow hurting, loving humans.

**Either in the case of your private or public wound, when you are hurting deeply, I wonder: what circumstances help repair cells (little sparks of loving energy) to more easily arrive to the site of your wound?**

I wonder if the **proliferative** phase of healing might be the part that requires the most discipline and the part where we might truly want to lean into Jesus' example. Did Jesus let his wounds contract (that is, take up less space) so that a part of him could be rebuilt out of new material? Perhaps there is no way for us to know. Or perhaps the proof is in the pudding. He had been bringing healing in the midst of myriad forms of individual illness and societal sin, absorbing hurt from others. He must have felt quite depleted as he retreated.

Yet by the time his friends found him, he was able to embrace his next move. We heard, *“Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.”* I believe deeply that Jesus had the courage to release the hurts he absorbed from others instead of letting himself become too weighed down and limited by them.

We may recall that in last week’s gospel reading from the same chapter of Mark, an evil spirit screamed at Jesus in a personal way that Jesus had to have felt reverberating throughout his being. But Jesus stepped away as a differentiated person, moving through the pause of hemostasis and the space making of inflammation to arrive squarely at the turning point of proliferation.

**In the case of the private or public wound in your life, what might help you move toward releasing the hurt you’ve absorbed and letting the wound contract while the rebuilding process takes hold?**

Finally, we can look to Jesus as a model for the **maturation** or remodeling stage of healing as well, remembering that in the maturation and remodeling phase, the tissue that has been used for rebuilding transforms, aligning itself along tension lines, working with water to help reduce scar thickness while strengthening the wounded area. We know that the gospel writers could only offer us glimpses into Jesus’ lived moments with the people who followed him. Today’s glimpse opened with hurting people clamoring for his help, his wisdom, and his healing touch. He responded with compassion and then stepped away for healing rest. While he was away, the Holy Spirit worked in him like water works with skin cells during maturation of a healing wound. Jesus was able to realign his energy with what others were asking of him.

He found clarity and shared with his disciples: it was time to go to the next community that was calling him – so they could share with that next community the good news of God’s expansive, healing, empowering love.

**One last time, I invite you to look at that wound – that place in need of healing in your personal life or in a public shared life in our congregation, in our locale, in one of your circles of community. And even as you open yourself to stepping away for the hemostasis (stopping the bleeding), for the inflammation to make space for movement, and for the release of the proliferative phase, what now is the next step? What work of maturing and remodeling do you sense is calling your name?**

Jesus embodied the courage required to be fully present in a healing process. I am reminded of one of my favorite quotes about courage, which speaks to me from a magnet on my refrigerator on a daily basis, from Mary Anne Radmacher: *“Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow.”*

I’d like to close with one more sharing of John O’Donohue’s loving blessing to us all, *“To Come Home to Yourself.”*

*“May all that is unforgiven in you  
Be released.*

*May your fears yield  
Their deepest tranquilities.*

*May all that is unlived in you  
Blossom into a future  
Graced with love.”*



People of God, people of love, let's worship God by trusting that we can participate in deeper healing within the tapestry of creation, the body of Christ – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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February 4, 2024 (5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany)  
Isa. 40:35-31, Ps. 147:1-11, Mk 1:29-39