

Nathan Brown
“What the Heck is a Gloria Patri? (Gathering)”
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West Side Christian Church

Acts 2:42-47
Matthew 18:20

What is worship? It used to be that everyone who came to church understood the meaning of this word. And not just this word, but all of the words that go along with being church: words like evangelism, mission, and stewardship.

However, with the dawn of the post-modern era, words that used to convey a somewhat universal meaning, have now taken on a diversity of definitions. Based upon one's context, background, race, ethnicity, gender, tradition, each of these words can mean something very different.

As a result, a new church is emerging in the world today—not a church that is necessarily any better or any worse—just a church that is different. This church is full of diversity, it is aware of its global context, and it understands that, in many ways, it must redefine or bring meaning to these terms for the people that it serves.

And so, West Side Christian Church, this is the cultural and ecclesiological landscape that we find ourselves in at this moment. For some of you, this might be hard to understand or accept. For others of you, this is common sense.

Regardless of where you fall on this spectrum, the reality is that we, as a congregation, must reclaim the language of the church by bringing corporate meaning to it. In other words, we must begin to come to some mutual understanding about these words. By doing so, we will find more intimate community, stronger relationships, and a much clearer and focused purpose.

As a part of our Vision, the church was tasked with the action plan to, “Offer worship services that appeal to all age groups, but still reflect who we are at West Side and our affiliation with the Christian Church (DOC).” In order to complete this action plan, a worship team has formed.

This team spent six weeks studying a book about different styles of worship. Currently, the team is visiting other congregations in the area to experience these different styles. Eventually, the team plans to sit down with all of you in a series of group interviews in order to hear your feedback about what helps you to connect to God through our worship experience here at West Side.

In the mean time, we have decided to initiate this conversation with all of you, through worship, by reflecting on the question, “Why do we worship the way we worship? What, in fact, is worship?”

This sermon series begins today and will take us through the next three Sundays, concluding on World Communion Sunday, October 4th. This series will prove to be more instructive than you are probably used to from my preaching. However, we believe this sermon series to be an important step along our journey of transformation together.

I think the best way to create a shared understanding of worship is by comparing how we understand worship to how we understand stories. Stories are the lens through which we look in order to make sense of the world. We think of our lives as ongoing narratives. Our morals, values, decisions, and even our faith are all shaped by stories, both from the Bible and from our own experiences. From the point that we can understand words and sentences, stories begin to shape our lives. And so, if we can understand worship as the telling and retelling of a story, worship becomes that which gives shape to our lives.

Although, for Christians, this story is not just any story. It is the story of the God we know in Jesus Christ. As worship moves from the prelude to the postlude, we are retelling that story—the story from Creation through Christ’s resurrection. Each and every Sunday, we come to worship not only to hear again, but in fact, to participate in that story.

The words we recite, the prayers that we say, the hymns we sing are all referred to as liturgy. The word “liturgy” literally means, “the work of the people.” Therefore, we are not mere receivers of this story, but participants in this story.

Kierkegaard suggests that one way of understanding worship as the retelling of and participation in story is to think about our experience in this sanctuary as being in the theater of worship. However, we have it backward when we think that the congregation is the audience, that those leading worship are the actors, and that God is the prompter. Instead, God is the audience, we are the actors, and the worship leaders serve as the prompters.

Against this backdrop then, I want to bring even more flesh to the bones of worship. In order to do this, perhaps it is helpful to think of a specific story to which we all can compare the story of worship. This might provide more of an entrée into understanding worship corporately. I am going to use the story of my most recent family reunion in order to bring meaning to how and why we move through worship the way that we do.

At this point, I would invite each of you to open up your bulletins, all the way, in order to refer to the different aspects of worship I will be touching on. There are four different parts to the structure of worship: the Gathering, the Word, Thanksgiving, and Dismissal. This morning, as you have probably figured out from the sermon title, we are going to be reflecting on the Gathering.

When I speak of the Gathering, I am referring to the section of worship that begins with Bringing in the Light of Christ and concludes with the Gloria Patri. This

section of worship is referred to as our Gathering.

If worship is like a family reunion in some ways, then the Gathering is the preparation for the main event. Of course, the main event at every family reunion is the meal. Just like the main event in worship for Disciples is Communion.

At my most recent family reunion in Indiana, when we first arrived, we greeted one another, became reacquainted with family members we had not seen for a while, and then we began preparing for the meal. We brought our casseroles and fried chicken to the table. We put out iced tea and lemonade. We set up chairs and tables. We spent the first hour of our time together in preparation for what was to come.

This is the purpose of the Gathering in our worship experience. In our reading from Acts, the disciples have just had their first worship service at Pentecost and Luke writes that, “All who believed were together and had all things in common.” The purpose of the Gathering is to prepare our hearts and minds for receiving God’s Word and reconnecting to God through Communion by reminding us of our common purpose and the reason for which we come together.

This is all initiated by the prelude. During the prelude, do you look around the sanctuary to see what the colors of the paraments are that indicate the time of year we are in on the liturgical calendar? Are they white, indicating the season of Easter or the season of Christmas? Are they purple, indicating the season of Lent or the season of Advent? Are they green, indicating ordinary time, that time in the church calendar that we are reflecting on the work of the church and what it means to follow Jesus Christ?

Do you pray during the prelude, asking God to remove obstacles from your heart and mind? Do you focus on breathing, to center yourself in order to better focus on worshipping your Lord and Savior? The prelude is a time for centering and preparation.

The call to worship orients our minds to the themes of that particular day. What are the words you are hearing and speaking in the call to worship? Are they about mission? Are they about stewardship? Are they about grace and love? Are they about forgiveness? Are they about sin? Remember, the congregants are the actors in worship, so we participate in the call to worship, as well as the singing of hymns and reciting of unison prayers.

Next, we sing an opening hymn—a hymn of gathering or praise, again, glorifying God and orienting our hearts and minds toward the specific themes of the day. Do you pay attention to the words you are singing? What are the words communicating about God, about us, about following Jesus Christ? Is the pace of the music slower or is it more upbeat? Is there dissonance or mystery in the sound or is there clarity and harmony? The music gives us an opportunity to make a joyful noise to the Lord, while at the same time indicating to us what God might want us to experience in worship that particular day.

The hymn is then followed by our unison invocation and Lord's Prayer. We want to approach hearing God's Word and experiencing Christ in the Lord's Supper with clean hearts and clear minds. So we pray, in the invocation, for God to enter into our lives again. We confess our sins and ask forgiveness through the Lord's Prayer. Once again, the words of the prayer orient us toward the theme for the day and what is to come. The prayer cleanses us in order that we are fresh and renewed to ascend into God's presence.

Finally, the Gathering portion of our service concludes with a climactic end in the Gloria Patri. Over and over again I get asked the question, "What the heck is the Gloria Patri?" The Gloria Patri is one of our links to the early church. This doxological hymn, or hymn of thanksgiving, has been around since the inception of the church. The words are, "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be. World without end. Amen." These words indicate adoration and thanksgiving.

This is a hymn of praise that connects us to the church throughout history. It follows our unison invocation and Lord's Prayer in order to thank God for God's grace and forgiveness, while at the same time connecting us to Christians throughout the ages who have worshipped the same God who gives grace and unconditional love to anyone who asks. Through the Gloria Patri, we give God thanks and praise for God's grace and our ultimate salvation.

Jesus says in our second reading from Matthew this morning, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I will be also." We have a time of gathering in our worship experience in order to prepare our hearts and minds to experience the resurrected Christ once again—through hearing the Word and receiving the Lord's Supper. However, we also gather together as a reminder of our common purpose in Jesus Christ, who lives in the community of the church, which we refer to as his body.

Each and every Sunday morning we have a family reunion in this sanctuary. At this reunion, we become reacquainted with one another, we hear and rehear stories of family members from the past, we give thanks for all that God has given to our family, and then we share a meal that binds us one to another. Each part of the reunion is important. If you miss one part, you feel like you have missed out on the day.

So, as we move through the section of our worship known as the Gathering, each and every Sunday, let us be more intentional about how we prepare to experience Jesus Christ once again.

Amen.