

First Friends Church, a Quaker meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
September 5, 2021
Abundant Worship

Psalm 100 (Psalms for Praying, Nan C Merrill)

Sing a joyful noise to the Beloved all peoples of the earth! Serve Love with a glad heart! Join hands in the great Dance of Life! Know that the Beloved of your heart is the Divine Presence! Love created us, and we belong to the Most High; we are born to be loving, expressions of the Creator's Divine Plan. Open the gates of your heart with gratitude and enter Love's court with praise! Give thanks to the Beloved, bless Love's holy Name! For Love is of God, and lives in your heart forever, with faith, truth, and joy, now and in all that is to come. Alleluia! Amen!

John 4:23-24

But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

Caroline Stephen, 1834-1909

Words may help and silence may help, but the one thing needful is that the heart should turn to its Maker as the needle turns to the pole. For this we must be still.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal, everything is incredible, never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed.

Message

I had a dream about meeting for worship the other night. We were gathering for the first time post pandemic. Really post pandemic; no masks, no distancing required any more. Everything was sparkling; the sun was shining, the meeting house was clean, white and bright, the Friends were all laughing and smiling, and I was wearing a new, bright yellow jacket to celebrate being out of quarantine. I began greeting Friends as they arrived and realized there were many guests of all ages. A new young Friend hugged me around the knees and it was joyful.

Then the meeting for worship began- but I was still greeting people! Things felt all out of order. Friends I did not know were playing music with all kinds of instruments, singing, speaking, dancing and moving all around the meeting house. I looked for a bulletin but there was none to be found. Someone said another meeting had offered to lead worship. Why didn't anyone tell me? I was confused and felt like a fish out of water and wondered who pulled the plug on my fishbowl!

Then I settled into a soft chair in the back and began really listening. Friends were taking turns singing and speaking about the Light as they moved about the meeting house, lighting and holding candles and lamps. They described and invited us all to join them in their experience of the Light. As I began to relax, the meeting house glowed, the meeting was gathered, and worship swelled into a beautiful harmony of Light in the Presence of the Light.

What is or is not worship to you?

William Taber wrote a wonderful pamphlet titled, *The Four Doors to Meeting for Worship*. The four doors are: before, inward, within, and beyond. The first door-before, is spiritual practices during the week; reading, meditating and praying. When even a few of us do these things our preparation allows the entire meeting to settle into the familiar and living Stream more easily on Sunday.

The second door-inward, is a specific focus or visualization of the meeting for worship. It might include praying for the Friend bringing the message, listening

to the prelude or quieting down in the minutes before worship begins. It is creating an atmosphere and attitude to settle in and begin worship. It is letting go and being fully present. The third door- within, is what we call communion in the manner of Friends or open worship. It is the time of listening together to the Spirit. A truly “gathered” meeting can blur the boundaries of self, expand the mind and the connection to God and others, and transform our lives and relationships in peace, praise and an experience of timelessness. The fourth door- beyond, is when we feel changed by being in the Presence together; a renewed conviction of our faith, a new perspective on our life and the world, and energy for loving. So when we “Go in peace,” we do all we can to live in peace and create peace in the world.

Taber “writes that meeting for worship is a form of communion for Friends, in which we gather in silence in order to enter a reality that ‘is always here within us and beside us, available to us as an invisible stream into which we can step at any time.’ It is not something we do, but a state of consciousness which we enter which brings us into communion with the Living Presence.”¹

Do you engage the four doors of preparation, settling in, communion and transformation? Do you experience a state of consciousness in communion?

For many Christians, communion in worship is experienced in the Holy Eucharist or Great Thanksgiving. It is a sacrament of bread and wine representing

¹ https://www.fgcquaker.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Four%20Doors%20to%20Meeting%20for%20Worship_0.pdf

God's gift of the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. Sharing in the meal and sacrifice is adoration or worship of the Presence.² For other Christians the communion table anticipates the heavenly banquet at the end of time, or represents a present enactment of the unconditional welcome and sharing of God's abundance. Like Taber's "door one- before" other Christians recognize every day actions of devotion- praying, reading, and meditation and believe these turn hearts and minds to things divine in preparation to receive grace in worship on Sunday.³

What is worship to you? The dictionary defines worship as an act of religious devotion toward and honoring and recognizing the worth of God.⁴ Some say "Christians worship God in order to thank God for God's love, ask for forgiveness for sins and to try to understand what God wants from them."⁵ Do you think God wants or needs worship? If so, what does God see as worship?

In a newsletter I receive I found this. "Transition into a time of worship can take many forms: a quiet moment of deep breathing and centering, a poem, a responsive invocation, gathering music, almost anything that marks this time as special, as out of the world. To dwell in sacred time for a space recharges us to go back into the world." They end with the query "What recharges you?"⁶

² www.rcbo.org › worship › intro-to-catholic-worship

³ <https://www.patheos.com/library/roman-catholicism/ritual-worship-devotion-symbolism/worship-and-devotion-in-daily-life>

⁴ Wikipedia.org

⁵ www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zwkjp4/revision/5

⁶ Progressive Christianity.org August 24

Last week was difficult with the evacuation of human beings from dangerous places: wildfires, hurricanes, floods, and war zones, and hospitals and morgues are full. This week there will be more of these difficulties, and we will remember the horrific circumstances of twenty years ago on September 11. It would be good to gather in a sacred place for a sacred time of mourning, prayer, repentance, guidance, and recharging. Is this what worship is?

I have so many queries about how we can best experience worship. Does it include praise and thanksgiving, repentance and forgiveness, fear and trepidation, stillness and dance? Words, music and centering silence? If we see worship as a time out of this world, and a time for being recharged to go back, do we teach and train ourselves to see the world as a dangerous place that cannot be safe or restful?

Is worship about God or about us? Or both? Can we bring our cares and worries to God without dumping them on God and excusing ourselves from responsibility? Alternatively, can we share them with God and be relieved of solo burdens so we can co-create solutions in healthy ways when we go back outside?

I think it is important to think about meeting for worship and how it shapes our week, time and lives. Does it draw us closer to God and each other or just get us out of the world for a moment? Does it just recharge our batteries or does it raise our morality and actions to a new level? Are we just renewed or are we transformed? Does it call us to serve or just prepare us to slog through another

day? Is it about resting in God alone, or learning to be vulnerable and supporting each other?

This month we hope to test broadcasting meeting for worship with our technology crew from the meetinghouse. But in reality the meetinghouse will become just one more zoom window on the screen, because worship is the work of all the people. The pandemic has taught us even when the people are not physically gathered in one place, at the same time, doing the same thing, with everyone doing something, we can still worship. As George Fox wrote, “The Lord showed me, so that I did see clearly that God did not dwell in these temples which humans had commanded and set up, but in people’s hearts...God’s people were God’s temple and God dwelt in them.”⁷

But I also want to ask: When we walk in nature and see the riot of trees in bloom, hear the wild abandon of birdsong, see a stream filled with sparkling water, feel the touch of the breeze, or enjoy the flowers on Sunday, do we know we are sharing worship of the Creator with all of creation? When we pray over our food are we not in worship marveling at the wonder that made food and our amazing bodies and gave us people who grow food and cook it and adore God in all of them? If every act can be an act of prayer, can every act be an act of devotion and worship? When we have “done something for the least of these have we not done it

⁷ George Fox, Journal 1694

for God and is that not adoration, honoring, worshiping? Is it not true that all time and space are sacred and a time and place for worship?

I celebrate that together or alone, “we can enter a reality that ‘is always here within us and beside us, available to us as an invisible stream into which we can step...’ and we can be “in a state of consciousness ... [in] communion with the Living Presence,”⁸ any place, any day, any time. For me that is Abundant worship.

⁸ https://www.fgcquaker.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Four%20Doors%20to%20Meeting%20for%20Worship_0.pdf