

Years ago, I was greeting people at the door following a worship service, as pastor Dan and I do here at First Parish. A woman handed me a piece of paper. It was a pencil drawing made by her son, Matthew, during the worship service. I’m guessing he was five or six years old at the time.

She explained to me that the stick figure in the picture was me leading worship. After she said that, I was able to identify the straight lines as pews and a robe around the stick figure. The best part of Matthew’s artwork was a thought bubble coming from my mouth. It read: “God, make me a better pastor.”

Realizing I might be insulted or that I might assume this was Matthew’s way of letting me know he was not terribly impressed with me, she explained that she didn’t think that it was intended as criticism. And I did what we all do when we receive a child’s artwork. I showered him with compliments and made it very clear I was delighted he drew such a wonderful picture of me. I actually framed it. I keep it displayed in my office as a reminder of what my prayer should be: “God, make me a better pastor.”

Think for a moment about how we react when a young child, a grandchild, or a niece or nephew presents us with a piece of artwork. The first thing we do is shower them with praise. Even if we can’t even make out what it is they tried to draw, we express our delight and come up with as many compliments as we possibly can.

Instinctively, we know the importance of praise for building confidence and self-esteem. We also know what praise can do for one’s relationship with others. It has been said praise is the key that unlocks the heart of a person. No matter what the age, praise can help a person open up and feel supported. It’s well known that praise in the workplace can be really important. People need to know their work and their efforts are valued.

Today, I want to talk about the value of praising God. You may know we generally follow a lectionary here at First Parish Church. A lectionary is a list of readings that are assigned for worship services. Psalm 148 is the psalm the lectionary assigns for the first Sunday after Christmas. I went through and counted. In the 14 verses that comprise Psalm 148, the word praise is used 12 times.

That means those who composed the lectionary deemed praising God to be the wise and appropriate focus for a community of faith in response to Christ's birth. When God does something extraordinary and amazing, as God always does, the appropriate response is to offer God our praise.

Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, "Our kinship with nature is a kinship of praise. All beings praise God." Psalm 148 reflects that sentiment. The psalmist calls on the angels to praise God. The sun, the moon and all the shining stars are to offer God praise. Sea monsters and the depths of the oceans are called upon to praise their maker. Mountains, fruit trees, wild animals and cattle, creeping things, and flying birds are to praise the name of the Lord.

There is a story told about St. Francis of Assisi that illustrates nature's praise. One day, while engaged in walking meditation in his garden, he saw a bare almond tree. He asked the almond tree how to honor God. Suddenly, the almond tree was covered with blossoms. Nature has its ways of praising God.

Praise is the act of expressing approval or admiration. If we can do that for our favorite sports teams and for children when they draw a picture or use their fork, surely, we can do it for God. We can express our admiration of God in daily prayer, in poetry, and in song.

One of the my most memorable experiences in worship involved clapping. Before anything else was said, a member of the choir invited the gathering to offer a God a "handclap" of praise. We all stood and just clapped. You could feel the energy and the joy in the room.

The most dramatic part of our worship service comes when we present our offering. We rise to our feet and sing those familiar words, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below." Praise tends to consist of the joyful recounting of all God has done for us.

Religious wisdom tells us humans join all creation in praise, but Heschel believed humans have a special role to play. He believed we are creation's Cantors. A Cantor is a person who leads a congregation in song.

Heschel wrote, "The cosmos is a congregation in need of a Cantor...It is [humanity] who is the Cantor of the universe. When we sing we sing for all things...The universe is a score of eternal music, and we are the cry, we are the voice." I think that's a beautiful idea. All of creation praises God in its own way, but human beings provide the words and the voice on behalf of all creation.

This congregation has a strong commitment to environmentalism. I'm going to suggest the most important thing we can do to care for God's creation is to praise God. Biblical scholar J. Clinton McCann writes, "It is not naïve to say that the first step in addressing the environmental crisis is to praise God, for praising God is that act of worship and mode of existence that reminds us that we human beings are not free to do whatever our science and technology enable us to do. Praise flies in the face of our culture's tendency to unrestrained exploitation."

In other words, praising God reminds us of our place in universe. God is the creator. God is the source of all that is. There is value in holding ourselves responsible to a higher power. Only 10% of our population, here in New England, attends a house of worship of any religion. That means we're not cultivating a habit of praise. We're not cultivating a "mode of existence" that reminds us we're part of something larger than ourselves.

In our efforts to diagnose the decline of the church in America, I often hear people cite things like the modern rise of secularism or the declining trust in institutions. I've done this myself. There's a tendency to place the blame externally. But maybe we need to self-reflect and think about the quality of our praise.

You can't truly praise God and be indifferent at the same time. You can't truly praise God and be sullen, or lifeless, or devoid of spirit. I affectionately refer to us reserved Protestants as the "frozen chosen" all the time. Maybe it's time to start putting that moniker behind us by consistently offering God our heartfelt praise. What if praise is the key to our own spiritual growth as well as church growth?

Do you remember the last verse of Luke's Christmas story? The shepherds went to Bethlehem. They found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in a manger. They made it known all that the angel told them about Jesus. The last verse reads, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

At a certain point, that first Christmas came to an end. The shepherds returned to their fields and to life as usual. But they returned home praising God. We have that same experience each year. We celebrate Christmas with music and worship and decorations and parties. When Christmas is over, we go back to life as normal, but our praise doesn't have to come to an end.

Ann Weems puts it beautifully in a poem titled "Later." She writes: Later after the angels, after the stable, after the Child, they went back... As we always must, back to the world that doesn't understand our talk of Angels and stars and especially not the Child. **We go back**

complaining that it doesn't last. They went back singing praises to God! We do have to go back, but we can still sing the alleluias!

Christmas 2022 is behind us. We're dragging trees out of our homes and boxing up ornaments, but our praise continues. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below.