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THE GLORIOUS DRAMA

The design of our sanctuary resembles most Christian churches around the world. We sit in rows facing the chancel--this raised area up here containing the pulpit and the communion table. The design of our sanctuary both underscores what is taking place here in our hour of worship as well as undermines our understanding of what is taking place here in our services. The sanctuary's design, set up as it is to resemble a theater, the chancel resembling a stage, the congregation seated like an audience, underscores something we can tend to forget when we come to worship--and that is that a *drama* is taking place in worship. Worship is the telling of a dramatic story. You might think about the dramas you go to see at the theater, or those you watch in movies or on TV. Just like those dramatic stories, the drama being recounted here in worship contains similar elements. There is a plot--a story that is told, and within this story there are tensions and conflict, even suspense. The drama also includes resolution to these conflicts. And there are themes that emerge that run throughout the story. The essence of the plot is the telling of God's involvement with humanity and also how humanity responds to this relationship. All this takes place week after week, not only in the stories we read from the Bible but in the very structure and organization of the service itself. The service itself tells the dramatic story.

Let's look at a typical service outline to see this unfolding drama. We open with a Call to Worship and a hymn of praise in which we recall the goodness of God. In telling this part of the story we celebrate God's love for us and for all creation, and of how we have been created to reflect God's goodness and love. The story we open worship with is one of praise and thanksgiving for God's goodness and for God's gifts.

But then the story shifts. The drama moves to reflect elements of conflict, of tension, of sorrow as we move into the Prayer of Confession. Each of us as individuals and all of us collectively fail this special relationship with our Creator. In the Prayer of Confession, we acknowledge the ways we damage the image of God that we were made to reflect. We are in conflict with one another, we ignore suffering, we harm the earth entrusted to our care, we give in to greed and pride, we do not honor ourselves. No single Prayer of Confession can cover all the ways we are broken and fall short, nor may every Prayer of Confession reflect your personal failures. But they speak to the collective human condition of brokenness and separation from God.

The Prayer of Confession could come at any point in the service. We usually pray it early on in our service, just after our opening praise of God, as a way of acknowledging right up front our need for God. We need God and God's mercy because on our own we have made a mess of things.

But this condition of brokenness is not where the drama ends. The story we tell in worship includes an honest acknowledgment of failure but it never ends there. For after the Prayer of Confession we always have an Assurance of God's Grace. Here we recall the love and forgiveness of God as we have known it in Jesus Christ. We recall God's power to forgive, to heal, to redeem us, to raise us to new life. The Assurance of God's Grace allows us to stand up, dust ourselves off, and get up knowing the power of God to love us and heal us, even while we are messed up and broken and imperfect. And so we can rise up in hope because we have received God's grace.

Having known God's healing, forgiving grace, we then extend that same spirit of reconciliation to one another with the Passing of the Peace. When we Pass the Peace with one

another, we are not merely being friendly or offering a nice greeting, we are sharing with one another a blessing: we are wishing one another the Peace of Christ, we are enacting gestures of reconciliation.

Then we recount the story of God's love and goodness to humanity by reading the scriptures, by hearing the life-giving message sung by the choir or a soloist or proclaimed through a musical offering, and through the sermon which interprets God's word for our lives today.

But we don't take this news passively. The good news compels us to respond, which we do with our offerings of money and our prayers for one another and our world. The sharing of prayer concerns and joys makes the dramatic story of brokenness and suffering, of needing God, of receiving help, it makes it all very personal as we hear about one another's pain, as we lift of the pain and needs of our community and world. And in the benediction, we receive a blessing and a charge to carry this message beyond the doors of the church into the rest of our lives.

Worship is the telling of a dramatic story--of our highs and lows, of God's constant love, of the hope we have in the midst of our messed up lives and messed up world.

Yet, the very design of our sanctuary can also actually undermine the understanding of this drama if we mistakenly think that the acting out of this story is the responsibility of those on the "stage." Sometimes the congregation can come to regard themselves as an audience, witnessing the activity of all those up on the chancel--just as an audience would in coming to see a theatrical performance. Sometimes the congregation members can think they are there to receive, to come to church like consumers seeking to get what they can, to be filled. And sometimes, truthfully, we all find ourselves in moments in life when we are in need of being filled. There is nothing wrong with that need. But we would be mistaken if we treated worship

as a passive event that we have come to witness. The drama of worship makes all of us the actors in telling the story, not just those people up on the chancel. That is why you are not referred as the audience but as the congregation. When you come to worship, you come to take a role in telling the sacred story, the glorious story, of what God has done and is doing in our lives and world. You do that when you sing the songs that proclaim the truths of God, when you offer your prayers, when you give your gifts, when you Pass the Peace, when you ponder the scriptures and the sermon. Worship is an active, participatory drama in which you have a role.

Worship reminds us that you, you personally, have a place in God's great sacred story. And that story unfolds not just in worship but every day in the ordinary as well as extraordinary moments of your life. God's glorious story is found in your life. When you mess up and need forgiveness, when you reach out in love, when you stand up against a wrong, when you extend compassion, when you exercise patience, when you help out someone in need, when you write that check to a charity or stock the food pantry shelves, when you are filled with joy God's glorious story is revealed in you.

We hear Jesus speak about God's glorious story in the prayer he offers in John's Gospel. We get to overhear Jesus' prayer for his disciples. In his prayer, Jesus refers to the glory God has given him. By "glory" Jesus does not simply mean exaltation. Glory also includes Christ's crucifixion, his compassion, his service, his humbling of himself, his forgiveness, his actions for justice. When he lives like that, he is one with God's ways and God's glory is seen in him. Then Jesus prays to God that we, his followers, might also be completely one with Jesus and God. He prays that we will have the same mind and spirit as God and himself and that others would then see God's glory in us.

We tend to think of glory as what comes from receiving honors or awards or achievements. When we receive an award, we know glory. When we are honored at our retirement or at graduation or in our community organizations or churches, we might know a kind of glory. But God's glory comes not through perfection or awards or achievements or by striving to live a blameless life, but by being one with God's way: God's kindness, God's compassion, God's justice, God's forgiveness, God's love. God's glory is found by holding fast to the story we've been given to live and to tell. And even when we mess up, God's glory is revealed in how we allow God to forgive us and how we seek to let God transform us.

And we practice telling that story here in worship. Take for example the Passing of the Peace. Maybe you have found yourself Passing the Peace with someone you don't even like. If you were in some other setting, you might avoid having to shake hands with someone you don't like. But here in worship, here in the telling of God's glorious story, you shake that person's hand because you are doing something more important than extending a morning greeting or even just being polite. You are wishing them God's peace. You are reaching down inside yourself to let God's spirit of love and reconciliation be revealed in you.

You see, worship helps us rehearse the glorious story so we know it by heart. If you ever had to learn to play a musical instrument, or learn to dance, or drive a car, or learn another language, you will recall that you had to practice this activity over and over again, until your body and mind knew how to do it so well you no longer needed to think about it very much. That's what we do here at worship. We come to re-enact the dramatic, glorious story of God's love so that we will know it so well we can tell that story by all we do and say out there beyond these church doors, out in the very ordinary as well as extraordinary parts of our lives. And then, God's glorious story will shine forth from us. We come to worship so we may be one with God's glorious story.