

Worship Matters!

Ezekiel 46: 1-15

Luke 4: 1-9

January 25, 2009

UM – Off Lectionary

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

How many of you watched the inauguration of Barack Obama on Tuesday?

Even though I don't watch a lot of TV, I watched this... because I knew this was a significant event that millions would be watching and I wanted to be a part of that.

There were other reasons; I wanted to hear his speech... I haven't heard more than snippets of his campaign speeches, but I have heard that he is an amazing speaker.

I have also been impressed by the way in which he ran his campaign... with an emphasis on hope... and change... without sugar coating the challenges that this would bring and without denying that it would be tough.

That it would take commitment and hard work.

He reminded me of some of our prophets... and of the message that Jesus preached.

What I experienced was Obama calling the people of the United States to their better selves... to be more than what they have become... and to put aside their differences and work together to make a better world.

What does this have to do with today's scripture readings you ask? ;-)

Both of the scripture readings are about communal worship... about recognizing something larger than our individual selves... about praising God being the purpose of worship.

About calling us to our better selves.

The worship committee met on Tuesday and during the course of the meeting a list of complaints that one person had brought to us about worship was discussed.

The complaints ranged from the font and Bible have been moved to we never say the Apostles' Creed to the artificial flowers are gone...to we read the Minute for Mission too often and others.

One person on the committee sat there for a while in silence while some of these were discussed and then said, "You know what; this is all crap! This is all about people wanting their own way and its crap. We are forgetting that this is about God, not about us, it's not about individual preferences."

And I admit I was initially discouraged by the complaints about the changes the worship committee has undertaken, because the many positive comments individuals have made weren't discussed, I quickly realized that the comments were also an indication of how important worship is to you.

At the Session meeting on Wednesday evening I asked folks what it meant to be part of worshipping community and then on Thursday, I sent that same question out with my weekly reflections email.

These are some of the responses:

- To enhance their spiritual journey
- Taking time to reflect on things that are outside of daily routine
- To get perspective on what is important
- To show love for and with one another
- To be the church family together
- To experience hope in a difficult world
- To be reminded of Jesus' teachings of acceptance and forgiveness
- Feelings of peace, friendship and love
- Care more about Jesus
- Opportunity to discuss faith
- Learn something every week
- Be become centred
- To get batteries recharged
- To share a common bond
- A feeling of sanctuary and peace
- To accept one another
- Responsibility
- To experience God's presence
- To spread God's word.

Isn't it interesting that none of those things had anything to do with where our furniture is placed or individual preferences for hymns?

They were more about gathering for a purpose larger than ourselves.

And so, I am going to take you through our worship service, and why we do what we do.

There are four distinct parts to our service:

- We gather as God's people
- We listen for God's world
- We respond to God
- And we go out in Christ's Spirit.

Before we gather each week, I read the scriptures and pray and ponder and plan on how best to share the message that God is calling out for me to share that week.

And on Sunday morning we gather as God's people... as a community of faith, individuals yes, but not only individuals.

We greet each other.... Smiles, handshakes and hugs.... We have people who, on God's behalf, and in Jesus' style, welcome whoever comes.

Years ago, the point would be made about being quiet. You would quietly go to your pew, nodding and whispering hello to the people you knew, and perhaps to visitors as well. Then you would sit down and be still.

Be still and know that I am God was a key approach. Today, we are more into welcoming. We talk. We chat. We ask how people are doing.

We express joy or concern. We visit. We hug. And, while this may seem less holy to some, I believe, more caring and open to each other, and I believe this is the way Jesus wants us to be.

When our service begins, with me welcoming you in the name of Jesus, because as Christians, that is in whose name we gather.

And then we have a Duty Elder leading... which is in itself, a powerful statement of faith about the priesthood of all believers... which is reflected in the statement at the top of the bulletin where it says Ministers: The Whole Congregation.

The Duty Elder shares some of the current life and work of the faith community.

And then the Christ candle is lit, usually with the help of a child.

A taper is used... it touches the candle and light shines... this is the way it is with people too... we touch each other, and in our touching can either offer energy or drain energy. We have a sung meditation to prepare our hearts and minds for worship.

There is a call and response. A conversation. I usually lead it, but if you did not respond, there would be no worship...

In our United Church tradition, we cannot have worship without a congregation. It is not a private, individual matter, it is a communal matter.

Individualism is a later matter that came from the Greeks, who had wonderful thoughts, but our faith is rooted in Judaism, where they had wonderful morals and faith. Worship is for people.

We have a prayer... sometimes confessing our shortcomings... we receive assurances of God's continuing love and care for us.

We sing... we sing old songs that take us back into our roots.

We sing new songs because creativity continues and newer songs challenge us to think about our faith.

John Wesley, I understand, used to stop a congregation in the middle of a hymn to ask if they believed what they were singing...

It is hard to believe how much change there has been in our faith over the centuries...

There is a wonderful implied statement in the first words of Genesis.

We usually translate them, In the Beginning, God created... But the Hebrew doesn't say that. It says, "In the beginning of God's creating..."

And this means that God is still creating. And that means that we have to be ready to rethink, to restate, to revise, to re-sing!

So we need some old hymns, and we need some new.

And if they are uncomfortable for a while, because we have to rethink where we stand, that may be part of God's Grace in including us in Creation.

We usually stand to sing... although there was a time when people sat to sing.

There was a time when an organ was considered too worldly for worship!

Some of the fiercest battles undertaken were when the organ was first introduced; in fact, the Presbyterians considered it an instrument of the devil.

Today we have organs, we have pianos, we have guitars, we have bells, we have shakers, we have sticks, and they all fit with what it says in the Psalms.

There is music and singing in each part of our service, sometimes we all sing, sometimes one person or a group sings... not as a performance, but as an offering... a way of praising God and drawing us all nearer to God and to one another.

We have children included as part of the worship... there was a time when the children would have gone right down to Sunday school and not been part of the worshipping community at all.

And we no longer expect them to sit still and be quiet through it all... they are participants...

Then we listen for God's word.

The central part of our worship service revolves around the Bible and the sermon.

Scripture is read in words of our everyday language, so that there can be understanding.

A sermon is preached, sometimes from the pulpit, sometimes from the floor. Words that have been carefully chosen.

And while I may have crafted the words, how you hear them and respond to them is the real sermon.

We Respond to God

In this part of the service we usually have our Minute for Mission, stories of how we support United Church programs beyond our walls with our finances

And we have our United Church Creed...

Did you know that the founding partners in the United Church, the Methodists, the Congregationalists and most of the Presbyterians as they formulated the 20 articles of Faith that make up the Basis of Union for the United Church of Canada also stated that each generation needed to formulate a statement of faith that reflected their time.

We had the historic Creeds, Apostles and Nicene, written centuries ago, we have the Basis of Union, much too long to recite in worship, we have the Statement of Faith from 1940, the New Creed which has been adapted several times since it was first formulated back in 1968 and just a couple of years ago we had A Song of Faith.

Each of these seek to express our current understanding of faith in a particular time and context.

We worship with our offering... the acknowledgement that we are called to share what we have with others, but just in this faith community, but beyond these walls.

We have prayers... joys and concerns... thankgivings and petitions... all offered up with the common words of the Lord's Prayer.

And then we have **Going out in Christ's Spirit.**

A final hymn to send us on our way, a commissioning and blessing.

And we leave... carrying the light of God's love out into the community, but not before many of continue to enjoy the spirit of God's community over food and drink.

This my friends, is what we do in worship and why...

And before I leave the subject, I want to talk a bit about our furnishings...

There are many lovely things in this sanctuary... there are many things that have been dedicated by loved ones... there are many things that help us to worship God.

The danger and temptation is in thinking that the things themselves are about worship...

While our font and communion table are symbols of our sacraments, where they are placed is not sacred in itself.

The pulpit in this church is in the middle, yet other churches place it off to one side.

While our Christ candle reminds us of the light of God, God's light is still present without the candle.

These chairs are not sacred, the cabinets are not sacred, the pews are not sacred.

If we start to think of them as sacred in and of themselves, the danger is that we start to consider them to be more important than the overall purpose of worship.

The people who came together to build this church knew that things were not as important as a gathered worshipping community, which praised God and served the community.

In fact, if this building were to disappear overnight, just as Grove Presbyterian and Kaye Street Methodist disappeared, I would say that we would still find a way to worship... somehow, some way.

Worship matters...

Worship matters because it is the one time of the week in which we all gather together... where we hear the stories of our faith... where we can be renewed in mind, body and Spirit.

Worship matters because it reminds us while many things are expected of us... that we are encouraged and challenged to be the hands and feet of Christ... we are not God...

That God is bigger and more powerful and more 'other' than we can possible imagine... and we can rest in God in worship, knowing that God loves us and cares for us...

And we can go out restored, renewed and reenergized to do the work that we are called to do.

We go out, not the same people who came in...

Just as that passage from Ezekiel says: *When the people of the land come before the Lord at the appointed festivals, whoever enters by the north gate to worship shall go out by the south gate; and whoever enters by the south gate shall go out by the north gate: they shall not return by way of the gate by which they entered, but shall go out straight ahead.*

The people go out differently from the way they came in...

We go out of worship, different than the way we come in... We experience God and love and community...

We go out, equipped once more to live out our discipleship in the world we live in... whether that is your workplace, your home, your community...

It is sometimes said that the role of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable...

I am going to leave you with a challenge:

To talk to just one person this winter, someone outside of the church, about why Worship Matters to you.

About why you are a disciple of Jesus... and I bet you just using that phrase makes some of you very uncomfortable! (smile)

And to invite them to come worship with you, to have them experience the good News of God's love, because it is GOOD NEWS.

Worship Matters. Thanks be to God, amen.

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