

## “The Way We Do the Things We Do”

This morning’s Gospel lesson is a cautionary tale to us not to take ourselves too seriously. It is John’s account of Jesus “cleansing the Temple.” Each of the gospels tells this story. But in Matthew, Mark and Luke it takes place during Holy Week, the final week of Jesus’ ministry, and it amounts to Jesus signing his own death warrant. The religious authorities want him gone because he’s a threat, and the Romans want him gone because he’s a disruption. But in John the last straw is not the cleansing of the Temple, but raising Lazarus from the dead. In John the authorities decide they have to get rid of Jesus when they can no longer deny his divinity.

So John puts the cleansing of the Temple very early, in chapter 2. The merchants in the Temple are doing nothing out of the ordinary: they are selling animals for sacrifice and changing money for the payment of Temple offerings. It is business as usual in the Temple: and so *that* is what Jesus challenges: the whole religious establishment in Judaism, and by extension *any* religious establishment; if we’re paying attention, even ours.

We’re not the only true church, and mostly that’s a relief. But we do strive to be a true church. In that spirit, I’ve decided to act on an idea that came to me last Sunday during worship. I want to walk through the order of service with you and talk about the way we do the things we do: not because it’s the only right way, but because it is a right way and there’s a lot of intent behind it. At the end I will offer some very concrete suggestions about things you can do to get more out of worship.

To begin with, worship is different from anything else we do. With the pews arranged this way and the worship leaders on a raised platform, it can seem as though what we’re doing is like a play or a concert or a school assembly. We come in and sit down and settle back and wait to be entertained.

But we’re not here to entertain you, or to earn your approval, or even to inspire you—although sometimes we can be vehicles of that inspiration. We’re here to try to help you open yourself to God. We gather for worship in the conviction that God is present. So we make our best effort to be present to God.

Worship is like a play in three acts: we gather, we encounter God, we go forth to serve in the world.

Act I is “The Gathering of the People of God”. It’s fun to sit up front and watch people enter through the various doors and to wonder a little bit about what they had to go through to get here. Body language tells you a lot. Folks who arrive early enough hear an Invitation to Prepare that is a reminder that we need to center ourselves a bit, to let all the parts of us arrive before we can worship. We need to align our expectations. That’s what the Prelude is for.

An Introit also helps to set the stage, to voice our hopes for the time before us. Whether the congregation sings it or the choir sings it, the message is important and always very intentional.

The Call to Worship is usually adapted from the Psalm for the day. Each Sabbath (Saturday/Sunday) has an Old Testament Lesson, a Gospel Lesson, an Epistle Lesson and a Psalm assigned via the New Revised Common Lectionary. The Church School Curriculum is based on this same sequence of readings, and each week the class lesson focuses on one of the Scripture lessons. So that’s the lesson we read before the children leave for child care or Church School. Today that first lesson is the Psalm; but that’s very unusual. So usually we slip the Psalm in—or a part of it, anyway, by adapting it for the Call to Worship.

It is important for us to say and to hear the words of Scripture. Walter Brueggemann calls the words of Scripture “cadences of home.” Our relationship to this strange and wonderful book goes a long way toward making us who we are. So we read the words aloud.

And then we sing; or some of us do, anyway. Hymns are very important. They are the foundation of the theology we carry around with us. They are the most exciting thing we can do together. When it’s Christmas Eve and we’re all singing *O Come, All Ye Faithful*; or when it’s Easter and we’re singing, *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, it’s just thrilling. But when the room isn’t very full and we’re struggling through something we don’t know so well, the moment is not quite so magical. So when I’m preaching and I pick the hymns, I always try to start us with something familiar.

I fully understand that some people aren’t comfortable singing. I get that. And I realize that whether they have any intention of singing or not, people stand up because they don’t want to stand out. But I don’t get not even opening the hymnal. The hymns are always very carefully chosen. They advance the theme of the day. Often the

poetry is beautiful in its own right. But a closed hymnal opens no minds and touches no hearts.

After we sing, we pray. During Advent and Lent, we open with a Prayer of Confession, acknowledging the distance between us and God and expressing our sincere desire for that distance to be closed. The rest of the year it's a Prayer of Invocation, which also asks for God to be present to us. The Lord's Prayer follows. It is something most of us know by heart. It is the moment of the service when the children participate most fully. It helps to bring us together, which is why it comes so early. It is important to say it aloud.

Then we are assured of God's forgiving love. In grateful response, we sing. What we sing varies with the season of the church year. This morning our Singing Affirmation comes from one of the great Lenten hymns, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*. There are some things everybody should know. This tune is one of them. We'll sing it every week until Easter.

Then the congregation is seated and we read the first lesson, the one they'll be teaching in Church School. Most weeks it's the only lesson we read in its entirety. Ideally we might save it for later, closer to the sermon; but it's an important teaching moment for the children to realize that throughout all our lives we all learn from the same Bible, and adults are studying the same thing they are.

Then typically a children's choir offers an anthem. Usually it is closely related to the scriptural theme for the day. Notice I did not say, "Then a children's choir performs." We work hard to teach the children that they are worship leaders; that their offering in song helps everybody to think about God and to experience God's presence; that we don't sing so that people will like us or think we're cute or just in order to garner praise. We sing to offer a gift of song to God and to point the congregation to God.

Then everybody applauds, which is confusing. But it's also the only collective way we have of saying Thank You to the children and assuring them that they did a good job and we appreciate them. The younger they are, probably the more appropriate the applause is. It's a learning process.

Then the kids leave and we do some business. In a lot of churches the Welcome and Announcements come at the very beginning, which makes a lot of sense. But everything that happens before the kids leave takes time right out of Church School. So we do announcements after they go.

We work hard to be consistent about two messages: “No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life’s journey, you are always welcome here.” That’s not true everywhere; but we want it to be true here, and so we say so. And we also state the purpose of the church in eight words: to grow in love of God and neighbor. And we try to tie all our business to that central purpose. If it doesn’t tie in, we shouldn’t be doing it.

Then an anthem does one of a number of things. It might deepen a spirit of rejoicing and praise with which we’ve begun. It might advance the scriptural theme for the day. Or it might prepare us for the upcoming time of prayer.

In the Pastoral Prayer one of the worship leaders tries to capture the moment and lift our hearts to God. It might flow out of the theme for the day. It might flow out of current events in our community or in the world. It might relate to the season or the weather. But it’s a way of saying, “Here we are, God. Touch us, heal us, shape us, use us in your service.”

This marks the end of the first act, The Gathering of the People of God.

Next comes a hymn to mark a transition to Act II, “Encountering God’s True and Living Word.” The intent of the hymn is to get folks up, to get the blood circulating, to engage in some deep breathing (at least for those who sing) and to set the stage for the sermon. If there is a hymn that is entirely new to the congregation, I am most likely to put it here... and then apologize.

Then comes the sermon. Ideally it’s a conversation between scripture and life. Here at Plymouth we do a lot of teaching during the sermon. Sermons are important in our Protestant tradition. A good one keeps working long after it’s over.

Then we respond. Act III begins with the Call to Sharing, a three sentence mini-sermon that connects the Word of God that has been proclaimed to the response of faith that is being asked. Always this points to the symbolic nature of money. What we are offering is not enough money to dismiss God’s claim on us, but enough to symbolize all our lives and loves and labors.

We gather it in... we sing praise to God (“Doxology” means “word of praise”) and we pray to dedicate ourselves—not just the money—to God. We sing a hymn that is intended to deepen this spirit of dedication, often by exhorting us to action in the world. Then

the Benediction sends us forth. I usually use the same one; my colleagues don't. Mine was first written for an Easter service, and almost always feels right to me. If it doesn't, I change it. But I hope people will come to know it by heart.

Then we bless one another in song. I've been asked why I stand on the bottom step for this. It's because I'm 5'9" tall. If I stood on the chancel floor the problem is not that I would disappear, but that many of you would. I love to be able to see faces as we sing.

The Postlude is the exclamation point!

When worship works we feel like we've been kissed on the lips and kicked in the butt; loved and launched. Worship charges our batteries for up to one week of living in the world as Christians.

Here, in ascending order of effectiveness, are ways to get more out of worship.

- Show up once in a while. It's better than staying home all the time. If you feel the need to limit yourself to twice a year, Christmas and Easter are the right ones, at least.
- Come regularly. Get a sense of the different seasons of the year. When you come, stay for Coffee Hour and deepen relationships. This helps.
- Come every week. You'll begin to see developing themes and to make connections. The elements of the service that you know by heart will grow. You'll feel like you're coming home when you're here. It takes a while, but it's worth it.
- Participate. This sounds obvious, but some folks don't. Actually read aloud the responses and prayers. Sing the hymns (never mind the aesthetics, the aerobic benefit alone will enhance the experience); or at the very least open the hymnal and try to pray the words silently while those around you sing.
- Look for connections. Services have themes: watch carefully to see how the elements relate to one another. There are 150 Psalms: why does the Call to Worship come from this one today? Out of 537 hymns, why are we singing this one? What did the prayer have to do with the sermon? How do the anthems tie in? We work very hard at this, and sometimes we're more successful than other

times. But every once in a while something you notice says BINGO.

- Prepare. You know what the scripture lesson will be for next week: it's in today's bulletin. Read it. Think about it. Pray about it. Attend the Wednesday Bible Study, the Thursday Young Adult Bible Study or the Fellowship Forum between services: these almost always at least mention the lesson on which the sermon will focus. Just for fun, outline your own sermon before you come.
- Check out the bulletin on line. We post it every week, usually by Thursday. Read and pray your way through it to prepare for Saturday or Sunday worship.
- Finally, and most importantly: expect to encounter God in worship. It might be in the sermon, an anthem, a prayer, a smile, or in the way the sun comes in through one of the windows. But one way or another, God will be here. Pray that you will be here, too... really be here.

This is not the only way to do church, God knows. But for better and for worse it's our way: deeply steeped in tradition and occasionally very surprising. To God be the glory!

Amen

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