

“Matins 50th”

I wouldn't want you to get your hopes up here. I know it says that this is supposed to be a sermon and all; but really what I have to offer today is more like a series of reflections on the significance of the Matins 50th Anniversary. Along the way I'll make reference to the scripture readings. But I don't expect it will feel a lot like a sermon. I can sense your disappointment. Maybe the Stephen Ministers will make themselves available after the service to help everybody deal with this.

I'll never forget my first Sunday at Plymouth in 1994. I was still the Sr. Minister-elect, sitting in the pew as a part of the pastoral transition with Jim Gilliom. I wanted to sit near the back, so I had to get here early. And I saw this youth choir start to come in, sort of racing and sauntering at the same time down the center aisle, with Anita Micich at the back there frantically trying to help them count to two. And they kept coming... and coming... and coming. I thought it was the biggest youth choir I had ever seen in a church. It probably was. And then later I learned that because this was the first Sunday of Spring Break, only about half of them were here.

Since that time I have learned a few things about the Matins. These were things that all of you knew already, but I'm not a very quick study. I learned, for example, that Matins is a cherished tradition at Plymouth that has had a transformative effect on the lives of youth and adults since the 1950's. I learned that, although Matins usually has a self-image of being innovative and out there and beyond the stodginess of churchly things, it is one of the most tradition rich and tradition sensitive entities in the church, not so very fond of change. And yet it is constantly changing.

David Nelson likes to tell the story about an axe that is a family heirloom. “This is a great axe,” he likes to say. “It has been in my family for generations. It came across the prairie with my ancestors on a covered wagon. This is the third different handle and the second different head. Wonderful old axe.” Matins is like that. In one sense it's always been the same thing. In another sense it is constantly changing and evolving, as the environment in which it exists changes.

The other thing I know about Matins is that it has never been easy, not even when it looked easy. It has always concerned the white-knuckle ride that is adolescence, the roller-coaster with the highest highs and the lowest lows, inspiring feelings of great intensity in kids and parents. It is the best of times and the worst of times. It's a Dickens of a program. And behind the scenes are happenings and personalities and heroics that most people simply don't ever have to imagine. There's way more here than meets the eye: always has been, always will be.

At its best—and I particularly want to talk about Matins at its best—I think Matins embodies at least six things. If this were a sermon, I would somehow have to make it into three things. But since it's not I'll do three groups of two, which is six.

First, and probably most important, Matins **affirms**. It tells young people, over and over again, that they are important, that they are loved and valued, that they matter, and that there is a place for them here. Do you understand what a huge commitment this congregation has made to this ministry by having the Matins sing every Sunday from September through May at the largest of our three worship services? I do not know of another church that does this. I tell colleagues in comparably-sized churches and at first they think they've heard me wrong. *Every Sunday?* This isn't unusual. It's unique.

So kids are affirmed not only as individuals, but as leaders, entrusted with a huge responsibility. They are leaders of worship. They don't always get this. But every once in a while they feel something flow through them to others, they sense the movement of the Holy Spirit, they are aware that they have been used for a special purpose. In learning to be leaders, Matins members learn to think about the care and feeding of the whole community, and to think about the greater good. So Matins affirms young people as individuals and as leaders.

Matins at its best also **teaches**. It teaches about music. That sounds too obvious to say, but it's a precious thing in this day and age. Through their exposure to Matins, young people can begin to gain an appreciation for the depth and breadth of the great choral literature of Christianity. Last week we devoted a whole service to the importance of music in worship, so I won't belabor that point now. But there's a tremendous opportunity here to learn an appreciation for music that will inspire a lifetime of learning.

Matins also teaches the faith. If you want to remember something, attach it to a tune. I'll never forget when we gathered in this sanctuary—in this very room, in fact—on the evening of 9/11, 2001. We turned for comfort to the words of Psalm 46. And when we read, "God is our refuge and strength," most of the people in this room knew the next line: "a present help in time of trouble." That was a time of trouble if ever there was one. "Many gifts, one Spirit": some folks have been surprised to discover those words in I Corinthians 12. The Apostle Paul, of course, didn't get them from the anthem. So we're very sneaky in this way of teaching the faith. At its best Matins has planted these little time bombs of meaning in the lives of young people. Matins at its best **teaches music and faith**.

It also **fosters transformation**. I've seen this happen over and over: individuals transformed by an overpowering experience of love in the context of community. Youth and adults discover their gifts and affirm the gifts they see in others. Deep sharing builds trust and caring. Groups come back from tours or some other shared experience and they are noticeably different from when they left. They start to sing and the rest of us say, "Whoa! What got into them?" We can't *make* this sort of thing happen. We can't engineer transformation. But we can try to create the atmosphere of trust in which it might happen. We can clear a space for it. And over the years Matins has done this remarkably well.

But there's an even deeper aspect to this transformation, and that is when it points beyond itself. Matins at its *very* best is transparent to something deeper, truer and more powerful than Matins. That something is what we call God. This is particularly challenging with adolescents, who are notoriously self-referential. Heck, aren't we all? It's all about us, right? Nobody ever had this experience before, nobody ever loved like

this before, nobody was ever a part of a community like this before, nobody could ever possibly have felt anything at the depth at which I feel it. Nobody else really *understands*. In a limited sense, that can be true. But in a deeper sense, the more personal a feeling the more universal it is. The more we get to the holy and hidden heart of who we are, the more we discover that we have these precious things in common with others. And the more we connect with God.

So the biggest problem with thinking that we are utterly unique and that our experiences and communities and relationships are unlike those shared by others is that we miss these same experiences of transformation when they appear in other places. We think the only way to feel again what we once felt is to go back where we came from; when really it's all around us. It's one thing for Dorothy to discover that there's no place like home; it's another thing to realize that home is with her wherever she is.

One of the things I have noticed over the years is how often people will come back to Plymouth to be married and will talk about their wonderful Matins experience here. That is heartwarming and wonderful to hear. But they sometimes then go on to say that there just aren't any other churches like Plymouth and there aren't any other groups like Matins and there aren't any other profoundly spiritual experiences like they had when they were here.

A couple of weeks ago I baptized an adorable baby for a couple who now live in California. They wanted their child baptized here because they have a lot of family in the area and because of the deep connection the mother felt to Plymouth. But they don't have a church in California. I agreed to do the baptism so that I would have the chance to encourage them to invest themselves in a church where they live; and to say, "Don't you want for your son to be able to feel about his church experience the way his mother felt about this place?"

When Matins is at its best it points beyond Matins and beyond Plymouth and beyond the high school years to the presence and power of God in our lives. It reminds us and assures us that the transformation we experience in this very room does not originate here and is not confined here. Matins at its best is **transformative** for those who participate in it, and it points beyond itself to the constantly transforming love of God.

Of course, Matins is like all of us; it's never doing all things equally well. In some seasons it has been a particularly fine choir. Sometimes it is an especially rich community. Sometimes the learnings are more focused on music, other times more on life. But in every season, through all its rich fifty years, and in all its many forms, Matins has been an axe that cuts deep and true.

So we're here to celebrate. And we're here to give thanks: thanks to all the directors and thanks to all the parents and thanks to all the participants who have been a part of the ride. And thanks to the God whose gift all of it is.

As we were planning this service we noticed something. One of the most cherished Matins anthems is the commissioned piece based on Psalm 46, *God Is Our Refuge and Strength*. And the brand new commissioned anthem, in a completely different style, is based on psalm 96. 96 and 46: the difference is precisely fifty. Pretty cool, huh?

Happy birthday, Matins Choir!

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