

## WORSHIP THAT MATTERS

Text on Sunday, June 13, 2010

*Luke 4: 16-30*

There aren't many stories in the Bible about actual worship services. It seems odd. Although the scriptures are central to our worship and to the Jewish tradition; and although they offer numerous guidelines for worship, stories from the weekly services are rare. Perhaps the rituals were observed so carefully that, in a sense, nothing happened. Except this one time when Jesus came home and went to synagogue on the Sabbath as was his custom. And all hell broke loose.

What happened? You may have often heard Luke's thrilling account of Jesus' reading from the scroll of Isaiah, proclaiming release to the captive and sight to the blind, then declaring that ancient word fulfilled today. The congregation is surprised, delighted. Prize preacher home for a visit, happy church, so nice. But Jesus isn't having any of it. *You don't hear what God is saying*, he pushes. Then he shoves. From 1 Kings, he recalls two stories where the one who actually attends to the requirement of the divine word lives in another land and was raised with other gods. In other words, God doesn't need your religion or your form of worship or your language or your culture to move in this world. And more: your confidence and your comfort in religion are blocking you from seeing and hearing what God is doing. For the one thing God does not desire for you is that you should have it your way, week in and week out. Jesus' attack on their familiar religion so angers that congregation that they try to kill their hometown boy.

That's the only gospel story about a Sabbath day service. Is this the model of what worship with Jesus ought to be like? I don't mean Kill-the-Preacher as weekly benediction, but I do mean worship where *God's gonna trouble the waters*, make something happen, end something, start something. Is that Jesus' model for worship and celebration? I think so.

For a season more extended than I could have imagined, I had no call to a particular congregation. I was pressed as ever with volunteering and projects. But on Sunday mornings, though sometimes wanted for pulpit supply, I was free to visit all kinds of churches. Mostly, the services were earnest and tame presentations, where everything took place according to plan. People showed up and spoke or listened at the right times; stood, sang, and sat as they were prepared to do. No one seemed out of place. Certainly, there was no one like blind Bartimaeus crying out from Rev.

Smith's sermon last week. Everything fit. It makes you wonder: WWJD in such a Sunday service? We do have one story on the subject.

If you should find yourself in Buffalo some Sunday morning, make your way to True Bethel Baptist Church where Darius Pridgen is pastor. True Bethel is on the black side of town. Unhappily, that phrase is not an ignorant way of speaking. For several miles, Main Street appallingly divides black neighborhoods from white. True Bethel is a black congregation, a large congregation—perhaps 3,000 meeting three times on a Sunday morning—and a congregation deeply connected with the saddest, harshest wounds of poverty and racism. They are not working on becoming multicolored or multi cultural. There is too much work to do.

Some of it happens right there on Sunday morning. The preacher will have set the room on edge with the possibility of a real consequence following from the divine word, a real hearing. He will be speaking of a man's violence toward his woman or his child. Of fear in the neighborhood after a shooting. Of how the young women—all you single ladies—give too much away because . . . because of an emptiness inside which no man can fill. Of using drugs last night. At some point, he makes space for individuals to respond, to do something or say something about the possibility of a new life inside them right now. As many times as I attended there, I marveled that the pastor never let the immense energy of these moments focus the worship on himself. My brief words cannot re-present to you the gravity and the lightness of that celebration. By sharp contrast with the scripted, calm worship I experienced elsewhere in those days, there came to my lips in that place the not-easy phrase, *This is worship that matters*.

*Oh come on, pastor, someone might object., All worship matters to God.* Let us not be quick to assert that. The way Isaiah tells it—read chapter 1—all worship matters to God so much that if its pleasant ceremonies fail to lead the people from soul service to social service, from greed to generosity, from war on the poor to peace, blessing, and unity with the least and the lost, then God will bring that people and their worship to economic, political, and moral collapse. Yes, worship matters—but we're playing with fire. What is essential in worship if we may hope we are making a fragrant offering?

Consider True Bethel Baptist again. It would be unholy to try to transplant the Spirit released there to a different setting and tradition. But Jesus' words to his hometown church can't let us leave it at that. What is essential to worship that matters is wonderfully apparent there. It is that individuals are touched and in some way healed of their diseases during the service and the church knows it, which means they see it but do not judge the sorrowful

story that went before; and this in turn means that the whole church is changed. Its walls defining who is in, who is out—all churches have walls—come a tumbling down. In worship that matters, some who have felt estranged from themselves, from humanity, from God can come home—and as they come, they change home. They break down its dividing walls. Its ordinary patterns give way to new gifts in the Spirit. And all flesh can see this together—in worship that matters. That is, the church learns that crucifixion-resurrection is not just Jesus' thing and not just a private thing and not to be hidden under a bushel. The life God gives is a light to the world. Worship that matters rewires the world to hear the least and the lost come alive.

The main thing ordinary church does to keep God's living word from changing things too much is scripting the service. Every part is pretty much nailed down; every person is prepared. No surprises, except perhaps from the preacher, and perhaps in a prayer offered in the Spirit. Why, we pay people to do this stuff right, right? Ordinary church is accustomed to a professional service, not professions in the service. Can it be a coincidence that the wealthier a congregation is, or a whole denomination, the more formal and scripted its service, without the least chink in the armor? WWJD?

If I were teaching seminarians how to design worship, a constant theme would be that they make space for some things to happen unscripted. Voices and movements unprofessionally inspired by God are essential to worship that matters. Of course this opens a church to a difficulty. In an unscripted moment of worship, a person who feels needy may draw the spotlight not just once, but repeatedly, and is that worship, or treatment, and WWJD, anyway? Jesus would not tighten the armor. I think a church must live into its response, rather than protect itself from feeling its people's needs.

So what about First Church? We know that something unscripted is released from our choir each week. Oh, there are notes and words on the page, but you can see in the face of Amy, if you're in the right position; and in the faces of the choir that something unwritten is happening as they sing. Also in the pastoral prayer we feel it. Also in differences intangible between the sermon written and the sermon heard, I hope. But what is the unscripted possibility for you, the congregation?

I have been thinking hard about this since I came among you, feeling on the one hand no need to shift the culture of First Church, but always eager for you to trying crucifixion-resurrection practices in new and unexpected ways. Two weeks ago I was in Chicago at the Presbyterian MultiCultural Church Conference. I took part in a three-day seminar called, perhaps a little presumptuously, "Advanced Multi cultural Models".

The leader opened with a startlingly basic word. "The road toward the multi-cultural church goes through anti-racism awareness." Period. Then he told us how in his Minneapolis church, this road took this turn. The confession during the Sunday celebration was no longer the usual general sounding of a written prayer by some hundreds of voices, but a sounding of just one voice saying what he or she knew to be her part, her sharing in the racism that wounds us all. The leader asked which of us were senior pastors. We raised hands. "If you are the chief shepherd, are you not then also the chief sinner? And if chief sinner, then chief racist?" He described how in any church, when the leader demonstrates that he too, she too, fails and breaks, he makes space safe for sinners and racists all to enter and speak. There is worship that matters. Do you think we are ready for confession like that here—for real, living stories about the shackles of racism cold on all our skins, now breaking? We will keep this question.

The broader question of worship that matters is never just Yes or No. The only reason that First Church looks like this and sounds like this is that worship matters here. Yet the dynamic need for more Spirit, more participation, more breaking down the dividing walls never lets up. That is how God is good, who never gives up, never lets us alone—not with our laurels and achievements, not with our disappointments and fears. God is God of change. However hard and slow is America's struggle to open heart and mind to the other, the stranger, hold fast to this. Something in every human being is yearning for an end to self-protection, sameness, and sin. Everyone has been touched by a hope transcendent, by the crucifixion-resurrection vision, however they have named it. In a way that really matters First Church in the city of Brooklyn stands for that possibility that our sight will be restored, and our captives released. Now deeper and deeper into it we must go, making a place for Holy Spirit to give voice to them we have never yet heard through service and worship that matters.

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