

A Tradition and Future of Praying

Luke 10:25-28

October 4, 2009

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” “Love God with all your heart, mind, body and soul.” “Love God.”

This is the scripture passage out of which two-thirds of our mission statement is born – gives birth to who we understand ourselves to be – who we want to be. “We are an open community of Christians who love God and serve our neighbors.”

I cannot tell you when I’ve been as enthused as I am this year about the opportunity before us during our *Every Member in Ministry* Stewardship emphasis. What an awesome experience it was to be part of a group of people in the life of the church working together to consider how we might tell the story this year – how we might bring the consideration of our membership vows to support the ministries of the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness to life. As the ideas flowed and images to portray them bubbled to the surface and laughter seasoned the mix a vision of what could be was born.

Maple Grove has a tradition of caring – for one another and for the disadvantaged of our community and around the world. The future is full of possibilities because of that tradition of caring. It is not about setting out in a new direction. It’s about what has driven our direction in the past being the same as that which drives our present and our future – how we do and what we do may change but not the motivation for being and doing. It’s about preparing this open community of Christians to love God and to be the Body of Christ to one another and to those in need beyond our walls.

Studies have shown that “vibrant, growing, fruitful congregations practice Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-Taking Mission and Service, and Extravagant Generosity.” In the comments introducing a study for local churches related to these five practices, the author notes: “These are the fundamental activities that are so critical to fulfilling the mission of the church that failure to practice them in an exemplary way leads to congregational decline. These five are interconnected and all are essential. By repeating, improving, and deepening these practices, congregations fulfill their mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Congregations invite and welcome people, allow God to shape hearts and minds in worship, offer opportunities for people to grow in grace and in the knowledge of God, provide channels for service to relieve suffering, and help people grow in the grace of giving.”¹

One of the serendipitous moments, for me at least, was during a meeting when we were considering these five practices of fruitful congregations which the general church has been emphasizing for several years and the five aspects of our membership vows and there was this sense that the two of them were made for each other. It was as if a marriage between these five practices and our membership vows happened before our eyes. The connectedness between Passionate Worship and our covenant with one another and God to support the ministries of the church with our prayers – the connectedness between Intentional Faith Development and our covenant with one another and with God to support the ministries of the church by being present with and for one another – the connectedness between Extravagant Generosity and our covenant with one another and with God to support the ministries of the church with our gifts – the connectedness between Risk-taking Mission and Service and our covenant with one another and with God to support the ministries of the church with our service – the connectedness between Radical Hospitality and our covenant with one another and with God to support

the ministries of the church by our witness emerged, and all of a sudden seemed obvious and the natural vehicle for communicating this year's theme.

Our goal today is to remind ourselves that prayer – that worship - has been central to our tradition of caring and to reaffirm the necessity that it will continue to be so for the future. And it is because of that affirmation that we can boldly proclaim that the future holds unlimited possibilities even though what they might be is not yet apparent. Prayer is a significant aspect of what makes worship passionate. It is central to worship – both in our corporate and private worship.

I'm not going to comment any further on the place of prayer alone in passionate worship. Instead I'm going to offer – to draw - some broader strokes of some images of what passionate worship might be in a congregation that wishes to be faithful and fruitful.

First, let's ask, "What is worship?" Is it what we do on Sunday morning inside this room or in the chapel? Is it what happens when we gather around a campfire when we're at camp? Is it what happened when a group of people on a mission trip stopped at a roadside rest and sang a song, prayed together and shared communion? Is it what happened outside Crimson Cup on a beautiful evening this summer with New Leaf sharing its gift of music? Is it what takes place every Sunday when Brenda and the children and a few other adults leave this space and us and go to the chapel to experience something a little more age-appropriate? Does it include those moments in our time together when the chancel choir, the puppets, the bell choir, the children's choir, or the Maple Grove Players offer their gifts? Does it involve someone being robed, an organ playing, using hymnals, and sitting in pews? Does it happen when one leading is wearing blue jeans and when words to songs are projected on a screen and people are sitting on chairs around tables and a drum accompanies a guitar? And the answer to all questions is yes.

Worship is primarily about us giving thanks to God – for who God is and for what God has done. While the purpose of the whole service is to express to God our thanksgiving, it is when we are praying, when we are singing, when we are offering our gifts that we are most mindful of this aspect of why we are gathered.

But offering our thanks to God – expressing our love for God – are not the only things that happen in worship. There is a sense in which God breathes life into us – into the community of faith – when we gather. Called from our ordinary lives into this sacred time and space helps to shape us, binds us to one another and to God, corrects our self-interest. We encounter God – God reaches out to us when we gather and we experience God's gracious love.

When we worship we experience our hearts being bent toward God and others. Sins are pardoned, relationships are restored, lives are changed when we worship. In that material I referenced earlier about Fruitful Congregations the author offers his take on it with these words: "Through engaging the heart, God reaches the interior life of worshipers. The intimacy of worship helps them know mercy, grow in hope, sense the Holy Spirit, experience grace, and offer and receive forgiveness. God touches worshipers through music, story, prayer, and Communion, and they experience belonging, support, and connection. Worship opens hearts."²

We don't get together on Sunday mornings just to fulfill some obligation – to squeeze God into our busy lives. Rather, it's a time when we seek to meld our lives into God's. It's a time when we try to forget what's going on in our personal lives and pay attention to – nurture – our faith. It's a time for us to contrast our personal agendas and God's will and make some adjustments. It's not just about what we do, but what God does as well.

“God uses worship to transform lives, heal wounded souls, renew hope, shape decision, provoke change, inspire compassion, bind people to one another.”³

So, what’s with this tacking on of the word *passionate*? When we use the word passionate descriptive words such as intense desire, strong feelings, heightened importance come into our minds. There is an emotional connection that involves something more than simply intellectually understanding. There is an eagerness, an anticipation, an expectancy, a commitment.

Passionate worship is alive, authentic, fresh, engaging. Without passion, there is a danger that what we do can become dry, boring, inauthentic, routine, being only form. Now, I don’t think what makes a worship service passionate has anything to do with what form of music is used in the service or whether the hymns are sung out of a hymnal or projected on a screen. I don’t think it has anything to do with whether the same things are done every week or whether no one knows from week to week what will happen in the service. I don’t think it has anything to do with whether the message is primarily spoken or uses movie clips and handouts.

No, I think it has a lot more to do with the attitude with which we come together. What makes a worship experience passionate in a community of faith is when the people gather with a sense of expectancy. It has to do with our being excited about being together and with what we are about to do together and expecting something important is about to happen.

Sometimes when we worship we unconsciously start to evaluate as if we are attending a movie or play – some performance. You know, we rate the sermon, we critique the anthem, we grade the prayers. While we are worshipping we do it internally and then our conversation in the car on the way home with our spouse or children or at a local restaurant with our friends at brunch or lunch, we say things like: “Well, what did you think of the service today?” “Well, I think the sermon was too long.” “I wish he wouldn’t try to make us learn new hymns.” “The organ was too loud – the children were too noisy – the room was too cold.” Too often we spend most of our time talking about the mistakes made in the service – the personal discomforts – the mispronunciations and missed cues – the flaws of our fellow worshipers.⁴

Passionate worship happens when we come prepared to encounter God – when there’s a sense of expectancy in us and we greet one another in anticipation of what God is going to do while we are together. Passionate worship involves our being prepared for what God has to offer us and instead of trying to evaluate, asking instead what might God be saying to me today through the words of scripture, sermon, anthem, hymns.

The result of passionate worship is that instead of those who gather on Sunday morning being simply a crowd of people experiencing the same thing together similar to going to a movie and sitting with a group of people, a community of faith is birthed. People feel welcomed and supported. There is an air of belonging – a connectedness – warmth.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the rich man asked. And Jesus answered: “You shall love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” “Love God with all your heart, mind, body and soul.” “Love God.”

Worship involves our loving God with all of our hearts, all of our soul, all of our strength, and all of our minds, and our neighbors as ourselves. Worship is an encounter with God and with one another.

One of the ways we experience that connection between God and one another is holy communion. It's a meal of remembrance – a meal of thanksgiving – a meal of grace offered to all – a community meal. And so we share it today with all who are gathered with us. This is an open table – all are welcome to share in it. You do not have to be a United Methodist. You do not have to be a member of Maple Grove. All are invited to receive the grace it offers.

1. Robert Schnase, Five Practices: Passionate Worship (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 7.
2. Ibid., p. 13.
3. Ibid., p. 9.
4. Ibid., p. 18.