

September 4, 2016

TEXT: I Corinthians 14:26–33, 39–40

TITLE: The Apostle Paul & Presbyterian Worship

I saw an ad in the back of a magazine popular with clergy. It said, “Do you want to make Sundays special at your church? Do you want your congregation to grow? Send away for Carnac’s church advice today.” So I did – and I received these three envelopes in the mail. The instructions said: *As any child of four can plainly see, these envelopes have been hermetically sealed and were kept in a mayonnaise jar on Funk and Wagnall’s porch until recently. No one knows their contents, but if you hold them to your forehead and ask a question, in a mystical and borderline divine way, you will be given the answers you seek.* Since we’re gathered here for church this morning, let’s start with a serious question: *How can we make this worship service better?* (Tear off end of envelope and remove card which says) **Remember that worship is a verb, not an adjective.**

I can’t tell you how many times during the week I describe the worship services here at ELPC. Typically, no matter what I say about Sunday services, people are listening for certain code words that will influence their decision about whether to visit us or not. Our Journey worship service is less formal. The music is gospel-contemporary. There’s not a printed bulletin. And the room where it’s held allows for people to offer up concerns for the whole congregation to remember in prayer. Our Sanctuary worship service is more formal and a bit less interactive, mostly because the space in which it’s held requires that. The music is traditional in that it’s typically hymns with organ and choir, but that’s not to say that it is formal or stuffy. And you, the congregation, are good about welcoming guests, so it’s a friendly service. Then on Wednesdays we have Taizé, which is officially a time of sung prayer. No sermon; lots of meditative music, time for silence and reflection—a peaceful mid-week break held in our lovely chapel.

People today are often looking for a worship “experience,” treating the word “worship” as an adjective modifying the noun of what happens on Sunday mornings. So they listen to my descriptions of our three weekly services and may decide which one is “worshipful” for them based on what liturgical style best fits their preferences: Hymns vs. choruses; pews vs. chairs; early morning vs. midday. People too often pick churches like they pick entrées at Applebee’s, based on the adjectives used to describe worship, when in truth, worship is a verb. It is the act of gathering together to hear God’s word shared through scripture, sermon and sacrament. Worship is a verb, because we worship by doing something: listening, praising, praying, and recommitting ourselves to the gospel of Christ as it is celebrated each Sunday. Worship is never meant to be a performance to be viewed; rather if it has any real value, it is an act in which we each engage—in which we participate and to which we respond with our mind, our heart, our spirit week after week after week.

Time for a second question: *Who gives the best advice about Sunday worship?* **Listen carefully to the apostle Paul today.** That's a complicated answer. We read a short portion of what Paul said about worship, but the whole conversation he had on this subject with the Corinthians filled at least three chapters. Chapter 12 talks about the varieties of spiritual gifts used in worship; chapter 13 has the famous verses highlighting how faith, hope, and love are the most important spiritual gifts; and then we get to chapter 14 which ends up with a basic question: *How should we worship?* Vs. 26: *What should be done, my friends?* To which Paul replies, *When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.* Is this simply a recipe we should follow in our worship services today? No; remember the Carnac advice said to listen carefully to Paul's teaching today.

Christian traditions for worship come first from the Hebrew synagogues. On the Jewish Sabbath, people would gather to sing hymns and psalms, to pray both individually and communally, and to read the Torah and hear some instruction on it usually led by a rabbi or teacher. On the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, the Greeks also followed ancient worship traditions, but with three main differences from the Jews: The Greeks worshiped many gods, not just one; the Greeks didn't have a single scripture to study, like the Jewish Torah; and the Greeks did not have a formal priestly class who led worship. Basically worship for them was done by individuals bringing sacrifices and gifts to honor the gods. But Greek worship dating back to before the time of Plato also included moments of ecstasy – of individuals being filled with a spirit of insight, wisdom, and joy as part of their close encounters with the ancient gods.

The apostle Paul basically had to help two cultures come together to create worship services that honored Jesus Christ. From the Jewish culture he took the traditions of singing and reading sacred scripture. From Greek culture he took the democratic idea of individuals bringing their gifts, their inspirations and insights and yes, ecstasies, into a shared time of worship. Each person plays a part in worship. There's not a hierarchy of values in the service; all are beloved of God and worthy to offer praise to Christ. That is very much like the Presbyterian idea of the "priesthood of all believers" and how ministers and church officers may have different tasks in the church life, but they share the same ordination and call to service.

But what about this speaking in tongues stuff? That doesn't seem very Presbyterian. Think of it this way: Every age has its own wonders and miracles. You came here today riding inside a metal box resting on four rubber circles capable of going faster than a speeding Greek chariot. You routinely speak into a small metal device that can connect you with almost any other person in the world. In the same way, some ancient Greeks memorized the entire Iliad or Odyssey, reciting that poetry on command in ways that almost no one can do today. And they nurtured forms of ecstatic dance and trances that they believed

opened their minds to fresh insights from the gods, in ways that our rational minds rarely appreciate or duplicate today.

Paul's words are not a recipe we are supposed to follow blindly. He is simply mentioning the ingredients present in the Greek-Christian worship of his day and age: a hymn, a lesson, a wise inspiration, a gift of the spirit that opens our minds and our souls—just as, if he were writing to us today, he'd adjust the list to name the ingredients present in modern worship today: hymns, lessons, an insight drawn from history, a inspirational word or image that we excitedly share with one another. But Paul's core message would be the same: Let all things be done for building up. Worship isn't a private performance; it isn't about special gifts or personalized abilities that separate us from one another. It is about building everyone up.

Worship is a time of coming together, of breaking down walls and biases and barriers, and of building up justice and praise and compassion together. The biggest challenge Paul faced with the Greeks was their tendency to individualism—my spiritual needs vs. all of yours—and the same challenge faces Paul with the church today. Worship is a verb, but it is not a solo performance. It is something we do together; each playing their part for the benefit of the whole.

Last envelope: What must I do differently when I worship? The answer to that question doesn't come out of a hermetically sealed envelope. That is something each one of us must answer for ourselves. But I'll let you in on a little secret. As you ask yourself, "Lord, how can I worship you more fully, more honestly and vividly today?" take time to eat something—like a bit of bread with a cup of juice. Take time to taste it and remember how it is a gift you didn't earn, the sacrament reminding you of the story, the gospel, the eternal promise of Christ Jesus. Take time to notice that you're sharing this meal with others, who have hearts and souls, hopes and fears just like you. Take time to breathe and imagine how people from the time of ancient Greece and Rome until right this moment the world over are doing exactly what you're doing today—singing a hymn, offering a prayer, hearing again about Jesus' love for the lost, remembering how Paul and others made time to be together in worship.

Maybe there isn't much that needs to be done differently when we worship except that we worship more intentionally. That when we come together on Sundays, God calls us to be more aware—more conscious of others around us—more patient with ourselves—more open to God's spirit moving in our midst as a quiet Presbyterian-type of ecstasy fills our souls. Worship is a kind of rehearsal for everything else that follows. We live out on Sunday our Christian identity and hope and vision for the world, practicing it together so that we might approximate it more fully, by God's grace, all the rest of the week. So remember I Corinthians 14, verse 26: *Let all things be done for building up. All things*. Paul still has a lot to teach us Presbyterians today. Thanks be to God!