

"The Church of the Future: Who Will We Worship?"

***1 Corinthians 11:2-22, 33-34
October 4, 2009***

***Acts 2:37-47
St. James UCC***

Preached by Rev. Robert Matlack

As we talk about the church of the future, one of the topics that we need to start considering is How Will We Worship? Our instinctive reaction is probably - what's wrong with the way we worship now? Why would we want to change? I'm comfortable with it - and other, similar kinds of reactions. In part that reaction assumes that our worship has always been like we experience it today, so let's take a look at that issue.

In our text from 1 Corinthians the Apostle Paul addresses a couple of issues. First Paul says that women should worship with their heads covered. If they pray and worship with nothing on their head there's no difference between them and a woman who has her head shaven (which obviously was a very big no no in the time of Paul). When I look around our sanctuary this morning or any other time that we worship, I see very few if any women with their heads covered (or shaven for that matter). That practice has changed, as has the one that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 where he says that women should remain silent in church. When you get right down to it, how many of us would want to go back to those kinds of expectations?

Or how about the other issue that he addresses in our text from 1 Corinthians 11 - namely that when the church gathered to worship and celebrate the Lord's Supper - which they typically did in the context of a meal - that isn't how we're doing it this morning, or how we normally celebrate the Lord's Supper. Even more, everyone brought their own food, but it wasn't a potluck supper where the food was then shared, rather each family ate and drank what they brought. Those who were wealthy gorged themselves on fine food and sometimes got drunk, while those who were poor went away hungry. That's certainly not how we celebrate communion today - and it's certainly not how we want to celebrate it!

Now in our text from Acts we find a much healthier church community described there. They are sharing - in fact we're told they had all things in common. In other words all of their money and goods belonged to the community - not to individuals, and they shared from that abundance freely with the poor. This was a church that grew close together - a large commune if you will - and it seemed to work well for them, but once again that's not how we worship or experience our life together as a church today.

My point is that over the years the way the that churches worship has changed and changed, and then kept on changing.

We live in a world today where worship in the life of the church takes many different forms. If you go down Main Street to the Presbyterian church, their worship has some differences, but it's relatively similar to ours. However, if you stop at the Baptist church on the corner, it will feel pretty different. Likewise if you go down Main Street in the other direction, the worship at the Catholic church will feel very different, and then worship will feel different once again at the Episcopal church. We could continue on to other church communities in the area - and what we would find is a tremendous variety of worship styles. These haven't just sprung up overnight, but rather have evolved over the years - just as our worship has changed.

I start with that context, because I think that to struggle with the topic of "How Shall We Worship?" we first need to be clear that worship here at St. James hasn't always been the way it is today - for many years- until 1920 the worship was even held in German. I know that when I came here, the language used in worship was far from what today would be called inclusive language. Over the years, one of the things that has changed is that our typical worship liturgy does use inclusive language - from the Call to Worship to the hymns that we sing - with the exceptions of The Lord's Prayer and the Scripture Readings. That's a significant change - one that has taken place gradually, but that also makes a pretty dramatic change in the language of our worship. Once we all understand that history, then I think it's easier to struggle with questions like - how will we worship? Should we change our worship style? If so, how?

We have a pretty relaxed, informal, and inclusive worship style here at St. James, and my best guess is that that kind of style will continue. It's a style that seems comfortable for this congregation. It's a style that seems to fit a "modern" approach to worship. It's an approach that feels welcoming, and has allowed this congregation to be open to trying new things - some of which we like and some of which we don't like - but at least trying new things, and welcoming people with different ideas than our own.

One major motivation for us to struggle with the question of "How Shall We Worship" is that this congregation has a genuine desire to include new people, to embrace youth and young families. We also really like our older folks, but we don't want to be a congregation where everyone has gray hair and the youngsters are in their 60's or older. We love kids and youth and young parents, and we recognize how important it is that they feel welcome here, and so for us that raises the question - what will make them feel more welcome here?

One recent change we've made to help people to get to know each other better and to feel more welcome, is encouraging everyone to wear a nametag. It's simple. It's easy. It's effective. All of a sudden our names are available for others to see and use, and that provides a more welcoming, friendly atmosphere.

The biggest issue that I hear people struggling with is that of music for worship. This is a congregation that has a long history of a vital, active music program, with choirs that

include people of all ages - and we very much want that to continue and to grow.

This is also a sanctuary that has an extremely nice pipe organ - in an age when they are becoming much less common. In that context, we don't want to not use the organ - for it's a wonderful instrument, and when it's well played (as Christina typically does) the music is inspiring and uplifting, adding an important ingredient to our worship. At the same time, organ music is not the music that young people respond to most readily. Their music is of a different kind, and churches that offer praise bands and other similar types of musical experiences are those who have tried to respond to this need. Just as Phil Reinagel and others here are trying - by trying to develop an option like that here at St. James.

What will our music program look like here in 5 years? In 10 Years? I think that's an open question. Will our organ be used as much as it is today? Will we have a regular praise band? Something else? I don't know the answer to those questions. I see a variety of patterns in churches around Western New York. I hear from people here who love the organ, from folks who love old hymns, and I also hear from people who are looking for something new, something different that speaks to them and inspires them in a way that the other doesn't.

Isn't that at the heart of the issue. Not all of us are moved by the same kind of music. But if we want to include in our congregation folks who are moved by more than one or two music styles, then we need to offer a variety of options here as well. The tension in that situation is always one of how you reach out and include people of a different music style, while still meeting the needs of the folks who love our current music. I suspect that that will be an issue that we all struggle with a lot over the next few years, and hopefully we can all do so in ways that are open and seek be inclusive, and with a genuine desire to find a path that addresses all of our needs.

There are other worship issues that will arise and that we'll struggle with as well. Perhaps should we be more visual in what we present - projecting more things onto a screen or onto a wall to be viewed? Are there other forms that might be used for the sermon or other portions of our worship liturgy? Charlie Markus certainly has a flair for writing little vignettes that make powerful points. I suspect that there will be other issues that will arise as well, but I also think that music will be the toughest issue that we struggle with, and in the end when we say "No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here" - we're saying that we strive to be open and inclusive to welcome, really welcome people who have ideas and needs who are different than ours.

In that context, to struggle with issues like these, is to really strive to live out what we say we believe - in a very real sense to practice what we preach!

Amen.