

Reflection on Worship

Jim Lowder

January 14, 2007

How does one talk about worship in worship in three minutes? My dilemma is that this is not too little time, but maybe too much time. Worship, by its nature, is something that, the more you talk about it and explain it, the less you experience it.

Nevertheless, let me simply offer this: Worship is the one time that we as a congregation are the congregation. We gather not because God needs us to, but because we need to. Worship grounds our faith and action, our learning and our doing, our thinking and our feeling. It informs how we are going to be in the world. It expresses our values and our meaning and shapes who we are as a community.

The ritual action – the symbols, story and language - all shape our identity. Worship is Holy Drama – not performance drama where there are actors and an audience – but where there are ritual actions that restore and transform those who participate in it.

These actions are symbolic and they contain sacred narrative - the story of our faith - and through our participation we are able to blend our stories with the story of God's people throughout history and make sense of and understand the meaning of our own personal experience.

In the movie *The Queen*, a story about the Royal Family following the death of Princess Diana, Tony Blair says to his associates in response to the family's self-destructive actions, "We must do something to save these people from themselves." In worship, we gather to participate in rituals that allow God to save us from our ourselves and our self-destructive tendencies.

A friend of mine is a professional musician and several years ago he was doing a concert at a college. He had the opportunity to have coffee with the new college president prior to the concert. My friend said to the president, "You have so many things on your plate to choose from to do. What do you see as your primary role? Administration? Fundraising? Recruiting new faculty?" The response was, "No. I am here to help the people of this college define the metaphors."

The ritual of worship helps us define – and experience – the metaphors that give shape and meaning to all of the rest of our life.

So, for example, when we break bread together, it is not because we have hungry stomachs, but because we have hungry hearts. When we pass the peace, we are not saying, "good morning, how are you." We are saying that we are broken people with broken relationships living in a broken world, but that we long for and value and are committed to working toward restoring those relationships and bringing peace and wholeness in our lives and to our world.

Called to the Arts
Smitty Dotson-Smith
January 14, 2007

The Sistine Chapel, Handel's Messiah, Alvin Ailey's Revelations, the Bible. . . All spiritual works of Art that move our souls as we see, hear, feel and think through their complicated lines and intricate creations. Surely to say these things enhance worship is not sufficient.

Our church leadership has decided to make Arts a priority. The lawyer in me would now like to list for you the reasons why. First, we can easily say that by embracing the arts we are also embracing many community members and supporting and enjoying their gifts. We are blessed as a community to have musicians, writers, dancers, photographers, storytellers, and a wealth of visual artists. Their gift to us is their willingness to share their intimate revealings, our gift to them is to let these moments in and provide a safe haven for growth.

We could also say that since Asheville is an Arts community -- it makes practical sense to make artists feel welcome. We want to be identified in the community as a safe place for them to explore their gift and its connection to God and Jesus. To come to the table just as they are-- artist and all. I expect we will be rewarded tenfold for our willingness to welcome the artist.

We could also say that as we develop the arts and become more courageous, it is easy to see that the arts could feed those in prison, those needing physical healing, those at Room in the Inn. We already know that the arts have place in Christian Action through our Alternative Gift Market. We also know that the arts have a place in cares and concerns as we saw last week in preparing the hand banner for Pat Parker; we feel the need for art in healing and in faith.

We could also easily rely on the idea that the Arts enhance worship and CE. A reminder to all that generally speaking, about 60% of the population learns visually, 10% learns kinetically and another 30% learns orally. I expect in our church we have a higher proportion of kinetic learners. Adding dance and fine arts is an easy way to enhance the worship service and make Christian Education more effective. We have seen our children act out and dance out their scripture stories, we have seen our adults dance out their prayers and supplications, and we have danced for fellowship. We have heard musicians bring Jazz and rock as well as classical music to our worship service. We have seen fabrics, banners and visual arts present us with new perspectives on our church community and our space. Just as Thomas needed to feel the sides of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene needed to anoint Jesus with oil, just as Jesus needed to fast, to sleep, and to wash feet, we need to touch the Sacred Story. Our body uses all of our senses to understand, enjoy and react to the world. We should use these senses to understand, enjoy and react to God.

And this leads me to the last main reason we choose art as a priority. It's about theology and our desire to connect to God. First, to honor the Greatest Creator we must honor not only the creation—and by that I mean not just nature but the human as well. We must honor ourselves, our own bodies. But we also must allow for creativity as a gift from God. As we create and enjoy being created creatures, we come closer to God.

And then there is this, and for me movement of the whole body best exemplifies this point. There's a story of a god who thought that in order for humans to get it about love, social justice, peace, and humility, forgiveness and grace, it was important to show them how the spirit could manifest itself in a human being. This god thought that the most important thing she could do was to birth a human so consumed by the grace and the spirit of the sacred that every physical action was in response to that spirit. That God gave us Jesus.

So as we may struggle with the diversity art brings, and as we struggle with the coordination efforts needed grow art throughout our programs, know that we take on an even deeper struggle individually, that of reconnecting our bodies and feelings, our heads and hearts with our spiritual growth. Celebrating what has been created in us and touching the clay ourselves to create. This commitment to the arts is a commitment to integrating our theology with our physical bodies. "Word in Flesh now descending". Thank God.

Called to Education and Learning

Catherine Gibson

January 14, 2007

I confess that as I stand here, advocating for Christian Education, I have chosen to dust off and reprise a message that I gave about 3 or 4 years ago; it simply describes how I feel about CE in words that say it best for me.

The perspective from which I speak is not as a Sunday School teacher, nor as a co-chair of the CE committee.

Rather, I will speak to you as a woman who, about 7 or 8 years ago, made a very disappointing discovery: that is, I had lost *completely* the ability to pray. It was right about that same time that I started coming here to church.

Shortly thereafter, I began attending Adult Sunday School. And it was there that something extraordinary happened: it came back to me, what I thought was dead and buried. Now, it might seem odd to you that I would credit the Sunday school hour, rather than the worship hour, for restoring to me the gift of prayer.

But you see, the tonic I required came in the form of *thoughtful discussion* about image of god; *lively debate* about biblical authority; *intentional reflection* about Jesus and how we apply his journey/his story to our own lives.

We are a community hard at work. We've been, and are, busy: busy at benevolence; busy at creating home in this church building; busy at advocating social justice; busy at hospitality, play and picnics. Our *action* is driven by our *Christianity*. So I ask you, *what drives our Christianity?* Worship, certainly. But in my case, the gift of worship was inaccessible to me until I *learned the stories --- had the discussions -- participated in the debates*.

I suggest to you, that if Christian action is the muscle-- the *movement* of this faith community; it is Christian education that provides the *nourishment* that gives our movement strength.

Justice
Doug Wingeier
January 14, 2007

I am a lifelong Chicago Cubs fan. The Cubs are perennial losers. Moreover, they find very innovative ways of losing--like having a fan in the stands reach out to take a line drive away from the left fielder and snatch defeat from victory, causing them to lose the National League playoffs.

Years ago, the Cubs' then owner-and general manager Phil Wrigley, the chewing gum man, hired a crew of 7 managers to run the club. They rotated in and out of the dugout, each directing the team one day a week. They lost big that year.

In a way, this is like having 5 of us each take a piece of a sermon that is usually given by just one preacher. Let's hope we do better than the Cubs' seven managers.

I think my infatuation with the Cubs is due not only to my having lived 10 miles from Wrigley field for 20 years, but also to my compassion for the underdog and marginalized, which was bred in me from birth. As a child every year at Christmas time I helped my mother select and wrap a Christmas gift for our African American garbage man, and then went out on the back porch when he arrived to give it to him.

Years later while teaching at Trinity Theological College in Singapore, my consciousness was raised about the Vietnam War by a Chinese-speaking student who asked me point blank why my supposedly Christian country was over there in Asia killing their peasant people.

Still later, in Nicaragua, I stood in the dirt floor shack of Maria Lourdes Blandon as she gripped my arm and told me with tears in her eyes of how her son had been dragged from that very home by the US-supported Somoza Guardia and shot to death in the street before her eyes.

Elias Rishmawi, a Palestinian pharmacist whose drugstore was raided by Israeli soldiers, his cases smashed, and his medicines spilled on the street to spoil in the hot sun, taught me about the injustices being perpetrated on the Palestinian people in the name of a God who supposedly had promised his land to the nation of Israel.

Talking with farmers in Chiapas whose families were starving because the price of coffee had fallen so low on the world market that they could no longer make a living, made me aware of a way of standing in solidarity with them by helping their co-op market their crop as fair trade coffee, guaranteeing them a fair price and a living wage.

Watching Mexican migrants wade across the Rio Grande in Brownsville, Texas, to seek work here because the NAFTA treaty had undercut their agricultural livelihood there, made me aware of the injustice of the so-called free trade aspects of corporate globalization.

The Christian Action Committee exists to lead our congregation in addressing these and other injustices and needs--homelessness through Room in the Inn and Habitat for Humanity, hunger and poverty through the Alternative Gifts Market, racism through Christians for a United Community--and to speak and act for world peace through letters and petitions and our presence at rallies and marches.

As members of the one Body of Christ, we of CAC offer our gifts for the common good--gifts of a compassion for the underdog, a passion for justice, a commitment to peace, and a vision of a community in which there are no losers, but all are welcomed at the banquet table of God's lavish, generous, accepting, and redemptive love.

We are Called to Care for Each Other

Phil Sageser, Chair of Deacons

January 14, 2007

Some of you may have seen Ann Landers column this past week on names that are uniquely associated with occupation. I was tempted to write in and tell about my mother's college roommate whose name was unfortunately enough Willoughes Butts. She had the added misfortune to marry a fellow whose last name was Luce. I'll let you

put that together. What we enjoyed as children was hearing about what his business was. He had an automotive parts business that he named Luce Body Parts.

Part of my job as the closer here is to associate these various loose body parts into a whole body.

And Paul tells us how to do that. He goes on to talk about the Body of Christ that we are called to be in the world. Uniting together parts that are equally important – the stomach cannot say to the foot – “you are not important” – the head can’t say to the heart – ‘you are not important’.

As the Deacons, we are called to not be the carers for the congregation, but to be the ones who coordinate our caring efforts together so that they are effective. It is our caring for one another that makes us a body.

It is that caring for us which God has given to us that unites us together as people that can be effective. Who can bring our heads and our hearts, our worship and our dance and our music together into a whole that can be effective in God’s world because we are called to care not just for our own fingers and toes, but to be the Body of Christ set loose in the world.

But if we don’t care for our own fingers and toes – some of you may have experienced some of the intestinal virus that’s been going around lately, when a part of our body is not functioning effectively, it’s awfully hard for the whole body to work together to make a difference in the world. So its’ our job to care for one another so that we can provide the care to God’s world that it so much needs.

The passage we read this morning talks about gifts of the Spirit, and what does it mean to have the gift of caring? I work with abused children. Many of them have been abused since infancy, no one cared for them. And it is awfully difficult for them to learn to care for others. The safest thing for them to do is to not care at all. And if you don’t care, it doesn’t hurt. But if you don’t care, nothing really matters. We lose the possibility for joy and meaning when we shield ourselves from the pain. It’s our job to demonstrate to them that they are worth caring for, even if that is sometimes painful for us – to give them the gift of caring, so that they may learn to care.

That ‘s the gift that God has given to us, the God who we believe cares for us, hurts with us, indeed died with us. So that we can bring new life together, knit together, not loose body parts, but one whole people called to caring. Amen.