

## WHO SAID WORSHIP HAD TO BE LIKE THIS?

Isaiah 6:1-8; I Corinthians 14:26-32, 40

February 8, 2004

Union Church of Cupertino

Art Domingue, Interim Minister

For the fourth Sunday in a row we're reading another church's mail: Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. In today's section the apostle is offering basic thoughts about worship:

Friends, when you come together... all things  
should be done decently and in order.

- I Corinthians 14: 26b,40

It sounds good... "decently and in order..." but what does it mean? Who gets to decide what's decent? Who sets the order of things?

Two church members met at Starbucks this past Thursday. One asked the other, "Have you heard the big news?"

"Oh?"

"The minister has decided to use bongo drums in worship..."

"Oh, no!"

"Over at the Episcopal Church."

(Wipes forehead) "Phew!"

Who gets to decide what's decent in worship? My idea of decent might be your idea of dull. Who decide what comes first, what comes second? And while we're at it, who said worship had to be like this, anyhow?

The first mention of the word worship in the Bible was by Abraham. He had traveled with his son, Isaac, and a few servants to the base of Mount Moriah. He said to the servants: "Stay here. I and the lad will go yonder to worship." (Genesis 22:5). We know that Abraham was planning. He intended to sacrifice his son to God. Had he actually killed the boy there were plenty of people then living who would have called it "decent" worship. (Cf. Miles, *God: a Biography*, pg. 59)

On the other hand, there were prophets galore in the Hebrew scriptures who cried out against sacrifice. Amos was one of the more vocal:

I hate, I despise your solemn rites...

I will not accept your burnt offerings.

- Amos 5: 21,22

What's decent for worship? Who gets to decide?

One of the persistent perversions of the worship hour is making it a time for hate.

Thomas Hardy, English novelist, grew up within the church. His father was a musician and conducted church choirs. Together they led wedding processions playing their fiddles. Hardy grew critical of what was being offered in worship and this criticism can be found in his novels. In *The Trumpet Major*, he wrote:

The religion of the country (has), in fact changed from  
the love of God to the hate of Napoleon.

We have done that. We have let our prejudices warp our celebrations. In San Jose a preacher recently used a part of the worship hour to inform his congregation that one of their members was having an affair and that they should cut off all contact with her.

When the new Suffragan Bishop was installed in New Hampshire, a church not far from the auditorium offered its sanctuary as a place where people could gather for prayer and protest. I happened to be in New Hampshire that day and saw the picket signs that came away from that service of worship. I was embarrassed to have any religious affiliation with those hate filled folk.

Worship can be wicked.

Who said worship had to be one way or another? Is there any yardstick? Are there more specific instructions that Paul gives us somewhere else in the Bible?

Our worship service, like most, could provide satisfying material for an archeological dig. We give prime time to the sermon. That began with John Calvin and other reformers who trusted the mind but not the senses. In the church of my ancestors the pulpit was always in the center of the chancel area. High and lifted up. The service might contain a Psalm or two unaccompanied by instrumental music but everything else was the spoken word. The Bible was read and interpreted for about one hour. The sermon was given, for about one hour. And then there was a prayer during which the people stood... for about 30 minutes. That was the morning service. After a lunch of cold food - no one cooked on the Sabbath - it was back to church again. Whatsoever might be the least bit exciting, whatsoever might light someone's fire, whatsoever might set the toe tapping.... These things were forbidden in the early Congregational Church.

Not many people know that by the time of the Revolutionary War worship attendance in the 13 colonies had reached a low point that has not been matched since. The great great grandchildren children of the Pilgrims and Puritans had been asking: "Who said worship had to be like this?"

Our worship service devotes a good deal of time to music: the singing of hymns, choral and instrumental music. It was not also so. For the first 100 years of its existence, a church I once served in Dover NH allowed no musical instruments to be used in worship, and then, finally, just the bass viol. When an organ was introduced into the sanctuary of Brattle Street Church in Boston some called it "an instrument of the Devil!"

In our service we have multiple opportunities for prayer and not all of them 'priest-speak.' You are invited to participate. In 1630 in Dover NH there would have been no written prayers. People believed that if written prayers were used - either by the minister or by the people - someone

would soon bring back the prayer book and in no time they'd be back in the clutches of the Pope!

Who said it had to be like that?

The answer, of course, is "No one said it." Mostly, worship has just evolved. Each individual act was justified by someone's theological affirmation and one thing got added to another and by 2004 this is what you get. In our independent tradition there is no one empowered to tell us how to worship. Even in denominations where there are Bishops and minute directions for worship there is dissent. You have high church worship with its focus on smells and bells and low church, seeming caring for nothing so much as nickels and noses.

Could we have bongo drums? Absolutely! Could we dance? Sure, if the deacons okayed it . There is precedent. David danced before his God.

How do we decide?

There are some clues in scripture:

1) One is found in the Torah said, and Jesus confirmed it:

You shall love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. - Deuteronomy 6:5; Luke 10:27

Our worship, then, would do well to involve many of the senses; to appeal to both ends of the body, the head and the toe.

Our worship would do well to avoid becoming the child of just one era. There has been no time when worship was perfect. Perfect is God's prerogative. We are called to cherish the best of the past and to use the best of the present, and to entertain that restlessness which shall create the best of the future.

2) Another passage from the Hebrew scriptures has been held up as the traditional outline for Protestant worship. That passage is Isaiah's call:

It opens in an act of adoration sung by the Seraphim:

"Holy, holy, holy"

It continues in confession:

"Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips... and here I am in the presence of God."

And then comes absolution:

"Your guilt is taken away. Your sins are forgiven."

God then speaks to Isaiah, a speech which many ministers claim as the justification of their offering a sermon:

“Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?”

And at the last a brave act of dedication:

“Here am I! Send me!”

3) Some churches fashion their worship service around Jesus’ celebration of Passover in an upper room with his disciples. They serve communion every Sunday because Jesus said: “As often as you meet, do this in Remembrance of Me.” The church I worked for in San Jose struggled with those words and with some of their members’ desire to come to Christ’s table more often. Eventually they decided to serve communion once a month as part of the regular service and all the other Sundays just after the postlude, at the altar for those who wanted to stay.

We have Biblical models but still, we to decide. Your deacons have agreed to allow some variations in our worship over the next few months

Next week we will use a new order of worship. We’ll begin with adoration. Confession and Absolution will be sometimes present, not always but in certain seasons, certainly in Lent. There will always be time for attentive listening to God’s word in scripture and the preacher’s commentary on that word. Then it will be time for acts of response and dedication such as prayer and offering.

On February 29, we will celebrate communion in the style where all who can will come forward... not necessarily to kneel but by placing one foot in front of the other to indicate that this is something we care about. Martin Luther liked this bodily affirmation of our inner desire. John Calvin preferred the method of serving people in the pew. “This teaches,” that God’s grace will find you no matter where you are.” We shall employ both ways.

There will be hymn sings before worship on the second Sunday of each month. During Lent we will use a different translation of the Lord’s Prayer each Sunday.

Who said? The Deacons and I have discussed it. And it is all in the pursuit of Paul’s instructions

Decent and in order.... So may it be.

Next week I will be speaking on my reasons for seeking out worship every Sunday no matter where I am; what it is that draws me again and again to church.

But for now let me close by sharing a poem by Phil Porter, once an Artist-in Residence at the First Congregational Church in Berkeley:

I’m glad that at some point in my  
life I learned to sit still.

Sitting still (not to be confused with paying attention) is a highly valuable skill.

Sometimes when I sit still I find quiet, peace, calm, center. Other times I'm wildly aware that my left sock is bunched up around my toes.

(Worship attendance) may require no previous experience but it helps if you can sit still.

Being calm in church mean mostly sitting still. It may bring me quiet, peace, calm center.

BUT WHAT IF MY HEART IS ON FIRE?  
WHAT IF MY SOUL CRIES OUT?  
WHAT IF THE FOUNDATION OF MY FAITH IS SHAKING?  
WHAT IF I AM CALLED TO MOUNT  
UP ON EAGLE'S WINGS?  
WHAT IF THE BURNING EMBER OF  
GOD'S GLORY IS PLACED ON MY TONGUE?

Will I be sitting..... still?