

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – September 18, 2005
“Side by Side”

September 18, 2005
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Philippians 1: 21-30
20th Sunday after Pentecost/A

If I asked you “what is worship,” I would likely get many different answers. However, your responses would not likely be that different, but rather variations on a theme. Over a year ago, the United Church of Christ conducted a survey of its congregations to discern their worship practices and preferences. When asked “what is worship,” the overwhelming response was that worship is first and foremost “an encounter with the presence of God so that we might be transformed to do God’s work in the world.” In fact, 90% of clergy and nearly two-thirds of laity chose this response. Respondents could choose two responses that best articulated their understanding of worship. Other responses included “a joyous celebration of our redemption” “a gathering of learners on the way,” and “an opportunity to be educated and empowered for ministries of justice and reconciliation.” I suspect we could resonate with all of these responses. Worship is this and much, much more.

As part of the God is Still Speaking campaign, the UCC conducted this important survey. They have entitled this initiative, “Worshipping into God’s Future.” They want to know whether God is still speaking through the worship experiences of its churches. They want to know what kind of music we play and sing, how many worship services congregations typically offer, if and when children participate in worship and in what ways and how often people celebrate the sacraments. There is a worship renewal movement underway in many churches and synagogues. People are experimenting with contemporary music, drama and liturgical dance, storytelling and power point driven sermons. Now talk of such things makes some people nervous. Others, however, are excited to imagine how worship might not only arouse one’s intellectual understanding of God, but heighten one’s experience of being in the presence of God by engaging more of the senses.

You may wonder why churches would want to change worship at all. We heard Bill Moses share that the worship task force discovered that many people at South Church experience a high level of satisfaction with our worship. It is our intention, therefore not to change worship simply to try something new. We would make any changes simply to insure that as many people as possible could have a transforming experience of God in worship. Even when there is a high level of satisfaction, it is

important to reexamine what we do, how we do it to discern whether or not it continues to meet the needs of God's people in this time and place. We can all agree that our world has changed considerably in the last twenty-five years with increasing globalization and technological sophistication. Why then does it seem the church is the last institution to change? Gil Rendle, a church consultant with the Alban Institute that works with congregations like ours, offers this advice, "the task of leadership is not to proclaim what form of worship is 'right' or to point out who is 'wrong.' The more important question is how, within this specific congregation, do we need to worship?" He says, "The answer to the question comes as a dialogue between God, the people of the congregation, and the culture in which we live." He also assures us that examining such things is a sign of a healthy church.

The church is one of the last institutions that remains intentionally multigenerational. I believe that is one of its greatest blessings. On any given Sunday, four or five generations of people may gather to have an encounter with God. Is it possible that everyone would have the same expectations and longings or that one worship experience would be sufficient to meet the needs of such a divergent group of people? At one time, I believe that may have been true. I am not so sure that is still the case. Anthony Robinson, author of *Transforming Congregational Culture*, the book that has informed much of our initial study, documents a significant shift in church culture. In an era of civic faith, when the mainline Protestant churches were the religious establishment of North American culture, he says, we tended to assume that everyone was more or less Christian. Everyone therefore, came to worship equipped with the basics. They knew the basic Bible stories, could sing the Christians hymns, and knew how to live a Christian life. People went to worship to praise God, to hear the biblical story and receive a word that would inform their daily living. In some ways, all these things are still true. However, people today seem to want more, they come with more or perhaps different questions, hungers, and longings.

Many churchgoers today were not raised in the church, or at least did not grow up as good Congregationalists. Many churchgoers are to some degree Biblically illiterate, knowing only a few of the most prominent Bible stories, but are unfamiliar with much more. People today come to worship not so much seeking advice or to hear about God, but to experience God. Worship is an integral part of one's Christian formation (and yes, we intentionally use the word "formation.") Robinson says "Worship, teaching and community---are at the heart of Christian formation---of how Christ is formed in us, and how the church, 'makes disciples.'" Today Christians are not born, they are formed. In an era of increasing openness and ecumenism, now more than ever, Christianity is one spiritual choice among many.

So what happens when we worship? You may have heard Dick refer to worship as drama. This means that the act of corporate worship, what we do when we gather here Sunday morning is its own drama. Dick reminded us last week that our physical surroundings, our worship space provides important clues about our worship life. Our windows allow us to be in contact with world, the baptismal font has a prominent and sacred location at the front of the church, the pulpit is central and elevated to honor the place of God's sacred word. The choir loft is located above the worshipping body so that we experience their music not as a performance, but as an offering, a true gift intended to lead us into a fuller experience of the holy. Upon entering the sanctuary one should understand that this is a space in which holy and significant events take place, and still, it is a place in which you are also welcome. So too, what we do in worship, when we do it, what precedes it and follows are all part of this sacred drama. We hope that what happens here brings us into the presence of God, honors God and somehow welcomes the stranger in our midst to experience this too.

The shape of worship conveys meaning. Most church services follow a fourfold pattern of gathering, word, communion, and sending. This is precisely how we organize our worship. Thomas Long says "this structure is not just an orderly way to organize the service, it actually tells a story that goes something like this: in the midst of our life in the world we are called into God's presence. There in awe and wonder, praise and confession, we are spoken to by God, called afresh to be God's people, given encouragement, wisdom, forgiveness, and healing. And invited to come to the heavenly banquet where, in the spirit of thanksgiving, we join the saints of all times and place in a great feast of joy. Then, having been fed by God, we are sent back into the world as people renewed, to love and serve in God's name." All this in just one hour!

Worship is not something we do alone. God never intended it to be that way. It is an experience of the holy in community. We need each other for this experience to be authentic. However, none of us ever has the same experience in worship. Each person likely experiences an element of this drama differently. One Sunday, an anthem may move you to tears and in that moment, you experience the holy. Another person may encounter God in the silence just before worship begins or at the time of silent prayer. Others encounter the living God in the inspired reading of scripture or a profound sermon. Perhaps you have met the Holy One at the baptismal font or at the basin on Maundy Thursday. It is our hope that hearing the Word beautifully spoken or sung, contemplating the word, or offering yourself as a response to the word will lead your into an encounter with our still speaking God. Worship is worthy of our passion because it is precisely the time and place where we meet God. We pray that

each week you will meet God here and that having been in the presence of God you will leave empowered to live your life in Christ more boldly and faithfully. It is a lofty ambition, but we hope that in and through or some times even despite what we do, you will be transformed. After all, it is not about what any of us do, but about the God who is present in this place ready to receive God's beloved.

Anthony Robinson shares an old, perhaps apocryphal, story about two signs that appeared one day on the sweeping green of the Boston Common. One said, 'this way to lectures about God'; the second said, 'this way to God.' At one point in our church's history, most people would likely have followed the first sign. In the modern church, many people now follow the second. This is where people expect to find God, in this hour of weekly worship. And yet, it is certainly not the only place. The prospect of leading others to God may seem a bit overwhelming, but if you have ever had such an experience, you know it is entirely possible. Robinson warns that 'to be in the presence of God is to be in a zone of risk, of change, of reorientation, of new birth. This is what is centrally at stake in the worship of the church today. Will our worship be a lecture about God, or will worship help us enter into that risky and life-giving dimension of God's presence where anything can happen, where we are not in control? I believe as the writer and theologian Annie Dillard does that the ushers at a worship service ought to be handing out hard hats and life jackets, instead of worship bulletins and smiles.

Paul's letter to the Philippians leads me to think of the church as it gathers to worship. He does not draw a picture of solitary recluses who seek spiritual growth alone, but instead affirms the life of the gathered community of believers living and working and praying "side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel." That is who we are. We are Christ's faithful disciples, gathered in the presence of the still speaking God. As we continue our pursuit of excellence in worship, I offer this prayer of hope written by a member of the UCC task exploring worship. May God continue to encourage us to work as Paul says, "side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel." Let us pray...

Loving God,

you created light and a universe
all creation praises you.

In each generation,

your faithful and courageous people
have sought more light and truth.

Reveal your light and truth
to this generation

in our worship of you.
Move among us through many ways—
in words preached and prayed, poetic and profound;
in sacrament, water poured; bread broken, wine shared,
in voices, silent, soft and loud, singing and signed;
Reveal yourself in music, in movement, through visual delights.
Meet us in holy places
and in the faces of those with whom we worship.
Transform us
through the testimony, tastes, and touch of your people
of many ages, cultures, talents, and tongues.

God, all Light, all Truth, we seek you.
We thank you. We worship you. We praise you.
We long for the fullness
of your reign of love and justice even now.
In the name of Jesus, Light and Truth. Amen
May it be so!!

Sources: “Worshipping into God’s Future: Summary and Strategies 2005”
Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship*
Anthony B. Robinson, *Transforming Congregational Culture*
Gil Rendle, “Generational Worship in a Multigenerational World.”