

For the Love of God
February 8, 2014
John 4:19-24

Our Scripture reading this morning is found in the fourth chapter of John. It comes at the end of the story of an exchange between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at a well. Earlier in this account Jesus offered her something far greater than well water; he offered her living water.

The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem."

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

May God bless the reading and the hearing of these words.

Let us pray. Help us to be as honest, as inquisitive, and as passionate about our worship as the Samaritan woman was about learning from Jesus. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

The Bishop who inspired our sermon series that concludes today claims that "without passion, worship becomes dry, routine, boring, and predictable, keeping the form while lacking the spirit."¹

Several of the good folks within our community of faith have already shared some of their concerns with me about the idea that passionate worship is normative in healthy, growing congregations.

¹ Robert Schnase. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Abingdon Press, 2007). p.36.

- One of you told me, “I don’t get why in some churches people raise both hands and move around during worship.”
- Another person shared with me that she is uncomfortable in our worship services when people clap when something moves them as it makes it feel like they are applauding a performance.
- Someone else mentioned that in our tradition good worship isn’t designed to produce passion with supporting feelings that others can see.

On the other hand, some of you think passion is needed. One of you even went so far as to say that his first visits to this church led him to look for another congregation because the worship here at that time didn’t seem passionate.

We are a diverse group. Clearly we are passionate about our respective views on passionate worship.

Whatever passionate worship may be, it isn’t a one-size-fits-all experience. Returning to our source book - *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* we understand passionate worship to be “alive, authentic, fresh, and engaging.”² Additionally,

In churches marked by Passionate Worship, people don’t merely show up and sit passively in their pews; they are actively engaged, genuinely connected, personally addressed, and deeply challenged. The messages touch them, the music moves them, and the services change them.³

This sort of passionate worship sounds like a nice ideal, but what does it look like? Those who attended the class this week that considered how American Christianity has changed in the last 50 years know that the answer to that question has changed significantly during that time. This morning rather than asking how worship has changed or may be changing still, I want to know what works now.

While the Bishop has pointed us in a helpful direction, his wisdom is limited by his observational approach that considers only a small number of United Methodist congregations. For an empirical approach based on the best practices in social science research, I turn to research conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. This group has been seeking to understand what really happens in

² Ibid., p.37.

³³ Ibid., p.50.

American congregations for many years. Since 2000 they have been responsible for the “largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the United States.”⁴

That research found “several characteristics of worship were positively related to growth in attendance,” including

- offering multiple worship services and
- describing worship as joyful, innovative and inspirational.⁵

Worshipping in spirit and truth has the power to change people. It cultivates passion. It can happen anywhere and at any time, but most often happens in the sanctuary at a designated time each week.

Surely you have encountered corporate worship experiences that were joyful, innovative, and inspirational. Likely these memories offer considerable variety and happened in multiple communities of faith.

To help us begin to appreciate the beauty of this diversity, I must move beyond the research and share my experience. Let me transition into a different role; I will act as your tour guide. In this capacity, I will share five rather different worship services in Southwest Florida. To be fair to the congregations I have served and am serving, I won't mention them – not even Fort Myers Congregational United Church of Christ.

Let the tour begin! **Stop #1 Vineyard Christian Church in Naples**

Susan and I followed the signs and made our way into a school cafeteria, which is transformed on Sunday mornings into this congregation's worship space. The small number who gathered that Sunday were all casually dressed, but diverse in age and race.

The most memorable aspect of the experience for me was the singing. Rather than start with an opening hymn, we sang several contemporary praise songs accompanied by a band with guitars and drums. The set included Vineyard music alongside other easy to sing songs. As I looked around while we sang, I realized everyone else there seemed to be focused on singing to and praising an audience of one: God.

⁴ Faith Communities Today. “Research Projects and Findings.”
<<http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/research-projects-findings>>

⁵ Faith Communities Today. “Report: FACTS on Worship.”
<<http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/report-facts-on-worship>>

Stop #2 Naples Church of Christ

This congregation recently moved into our neighborhood; their property backs up to the gated community in which we live. When they made the transition they did quite a bit of marketing. Those materials confused a good number of people since this church has nearly the same name as a radically different congregation where I serve: Naples United Church of Christ. This new church campus - the Naples Church of Christ - is not a UCC congregation. They are affiliated with a very different tradition: the Church of Christ.

Their rather traditional sanctuary was void of instruments. As someone who doesn't sing all that well I realized my voice would not be drowned out by any instrument. Somehow, the song leader managed to blend the congregation's voices into a beautiful choir that sounded unlike anything I had ever heard. Rather than distracting me, our acapella efforts ushered me in to a deep awareness of God's presence.⁶

Stop #3 North Naples United Methodist Church

This is a large church; currently, they are among the top 100 largest United Methodist congregations in the country.⁷ My visit didn't require me to get in my car and drive somewhere. It was a virtual experience. While this congregation offers contemporary and traditional worship services each Sunday, I visited their online service.

As someone who spends more than my fair share of time online, I am especially appreciative of how churches are using the internet to expand their ministries. For me, worship was more than just a live video stream of one of the Sunday services; it was an experience designed to blend the best of that live in person experience with the best of technology. I felt like I was part of the community that gathered on the church campus, and I was also very much a part of the group that was connected to one another online.⁸

⁶ For more information about my experience read Greg Smith. "My Visit to Naples Church of Christ." <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2010/10/03/my-visit-to-naples-church-of-christ/>>

⁷ North Naples United Methodist Church. "History." <<http://www.northnaplesumc.com/about-us/history>>

⁸ In the time since my visit their efforts to continue innovating have included a name change to North Naples Church. For more information see Robin DeMattia, "Googling for God: North Naples Church Drops Denomination for Better Internet Searchability." Naples Daily News, January 24, 2015. <http://www.naplesnews.com/lifestyle/faith-and-values/googling-for-god-north-naples-church-drops-denomination-for-better-internet-searchability_18667810>

Stop #4 Next Level Church in Fort Myers

This is a church that has garnered national attention as one of America's top ten fastest growing churches.⁹ Since they are the closest church on that list, I decided to visit one of their weekend services with a colleague to see what we might learn.

We entered into a modern lobby that included a coffee shop and a large visitor information center. While the crowd included a few retirees, most of the participants were much younger than most congregations in Southwest Florida. Walking into the sanctuary was like walking into a blend of a movie theatre and a rock concert.

What I remember most about this worship service was how technology was utilized. Screens were used as a worship guide rather than a worship bulletin, people were encouraged to use Twitter as a backchannel, a previously recorded video message from a pastor was shared, and the baptisms included in the service happened outside in a pool but were shared with those inside via a live video feed.¹⁰

Stop #5 Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Naples

While I have limited experience in the Vineyard, the Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and in non-denominational churches, I am more familiar with Lutheranism. Earlier in my ministry, I served an ELCA – that is Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – congregation in Texas. So, Emmanuel Lutheran Church felt more familiar to Susan and to me as we made our way to a pew toward the back of the traditional sanctuary.

This is the only blended service on our tour; it featured music that was traditional alongside music many would label contemporary. Rather than the music or the message, what I remember with the greatest clarity is Holy Communion. For the first time in several years, I was invited to stand and to make my way to one of several stations to partake of the bread and to drink from the cup. As I stood in a long line I became increasingly aware of the sense of expectation that I shared with those beside me as we slowly traveled step by step to receive the elements.

⁹ "100 Largest and Fastest Growing Churches in America," Outreach Magazine, 2012.

¹⁰ For more information about my experience read Greg Smith, "My Visit to Next Level Church." <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2012/10/23/my-visit-to-next-level-church/>>

Our tour ends here, but our experience continues.

As we live into God's preferred future together, I invite you

- to bring your passion to worship each and every time we gather,
- and to welcome innovation – even and perhaps especially when it pushes you beyond your comfort zone.

Amen.