

For the Love of God
February 2, 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.

Today we focus on passionate worship as one of the five practices of fruitful congregations. Passionate worship isn't about music style or volume or instrumentation. It isn't a one size fits all experience.

Passionate worship sounds like a nice ideal, but how does it compare to what is really happening each week at the services held at America's many houses of worship? How has worship changed in recent years? Are there any research based best practices from which we can learn?

I can't answer all of those questions much less all of the questions you may have. I will, however, offer some wisdom from recent research alongside some of my personal experiences.

First the research . . . the Hartford Institute for Religion Research has been seeking to understand what really happens in American congregations for many years. In 2000 and again in 2010 they conducted the “largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the United States.”¹

They 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.²

They also found that change isn’t easy. In reality 42% percent of congregational leaders indicated there is conflict about “how worship is conducted” in their congregations.³

Change, when it happens, is generally slow and incremental.⁴

If you want to learn more about these worship changes over the last 10-15 years or to understand the even bigger picture shifts in American Protestantism over the last 50 years, I invite you to plan to participate in our all congregation workshop on Saturday, February 22. This morning, I will focus more narrowly on worship.

In talking about worship in fruitful congregations, I recognize it all begins with worshippers who worship in spirit and in truth. It includes passion. It can happen anywhere and at any time, but most often happens in the sanctuary at a designated time each week.

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 as I 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 United Church.

¹ Faith Communities Today. “Research Projects and Findings.”
<<http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/research-projects-findings>>

² Faith Communities Today. “Report: FACTS on Worship.”
<<http://faithcommunitiestoday.org/report-facts-on-worship>>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Marjorie H. Royal. “FACTS on Worship: 2010,” p.1.

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 in a row. 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.

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 the Church of Christ.

Their rather traditional sanctuary was void of instruments. While the singing was beautiful, it was something else entirely that I will never forget: their warm and genuine welcome. I was greeted by more people there than I have ever been at any church. Many wanted to welcome me, to learn about me, and to invite me to other church activities. They were truly glad I was there.⁵

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.⁶ 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.

⁵ 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/>>

⁶ North Naples United Methodist Church. "History." <<http://www.northnaplesumc.com/about-us/history>>

As someone who spends many hours of the day every day 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 world with the best of technology. I felt like I was part of the community that gathered on the church campus, and I felt part of the group that was connected to one another online.

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. Since they are the closest church on that list, Pastor Ron and I decided we would visit one of their weekend services 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 just how experiential every element was meant to be. They even brought the outdoors inside by broadcasting video of live baptisms happening out in the parking lot into the air conditioned sanctuary.⁷

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 and on the lectern side.

This was 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

⁷ 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/>>

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.

Our tour ends here, but our experience continues.

I won't ask you to stand and make your way to the Table in order to receive the Lord's Supper this morning. I will, however, invite you to worship in spirit and in truth.

Also, I will encourage you to be passionate about your worship. While doing so, please recognize and respect the passion in those around you – even when it looks different from your own.

As we live into God's future together, your input is essential. Help us create and continue to refine a worship experience that invites and even multiplies passion. Be a part of the ongoing planning process to help ensure our weekly experiences are joyful, innovative and inspirational.

Now is the time to move forward together.

Will you make this commitment?

Amen.