

The Body of Christ in Worship

When I was planning my Sabbatical this past spring, I had several goals in mind. I wanted to learn more about the ecumenical communities of Taizé and Iona, about how they practiced the worship styles that they have so famously developed and about how they kept the ecumenical spirit alive at a time of so much strife in the Christian communion. I wanted to experience worship in some of the great cathedrals of Europe and I also wanted to worship with some of my colleagues and friends here at home and with some of our neighbors. Another goal was to see first-hand some of the great art that has inspired worshippers over the centuries both in the settings of those cathedrals and in the museums where many of those pieces of art now hang. I wanted to indulge a little in my favorite art form of the theatre. And I wanted time to read and to think and to pray. In all of this, I hoped not only to return to you refreshed in body, mind and spirit so that I could be the best pastor for you that I possibly could be but also I hoped to bring back with me some ideas that would enhance our worship together and our ministry to our community. I know that I succeeded in the goal of coming back to you refreshed. We will have to determine together if the ideas I've brought home will be an enhancement for worship and work.

I want to focus this morning on my reflections concerning art and music, on how those very human but perhaps divinely inspired elements have enhanced the worship of believers across millennia and on how we might further utilize art and music at Good Shepherd Baptist not only to deepen our experience in worship but also perhaps to draw more seekers into our midst. And, like every good Baptist preacher, I want to ground our considerations in the lessons of Scripture. Despite outbreaks of iconoclasm in the Middle Ages and during the Reformation when art of all kinds was banished from churches and similar points in our diverse Christian heritage when music was considered scandalous or when certain music was “in” and other music was “out,” the Bible shows that music and art have been a significant part of worship from both the early days of the Hebrew worship of Yahweh and from the beginning of the Church. Indeed, historians of music, the visual arts, drama and dance tell us that all of these art forms developed in large part as human response to the presence of the divine.

Probably the most often quoted scripture passage on the subject of visual arts comes from the Ten Commandments, specifically Exodus 20:4-6. We're probably still most familiar with these verses from the old King James Version: “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.” But this ban on graven images or idols was clearly never meant to exclude all visual art from daily life or even from the place of worship. We also find in Exodus the very detailed directions about the creation of the Tabernacle; the place of God's resting with God's people while they were on the march. From the description, it must have been an exquisitely beautiful work of practical craft and artistic décor. The description runs to whole chapters, so we will not read it this morning but I encourage you to read it in a modern translation at your leisure. What I do want to point out is a passage dear to the heart of every believer-artist, the description by Moses of the sacred calling of the artists in charge of the creation of the Tabernacle: “Then Moses said to the Israelites: See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; he has filled him with divine spirit, with skill, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. And he has inspired him to teach, both him and Oholiab son of

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Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. He has filled them with skill to do every kind of work done by an artisan or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and in fine linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of artisan or skilled designer.”

Clearly the arts have a place, an honored place, in the worship of God. Lest there be any doubt, Moses describes the artists as people inspired in their craft and in their art and also in their ability to teach others as craftsmen and artists. In the circle of believer-artists in which I moved in my previous career, this passage was held up both as a defense of our work and as a point of pride in our calling. This is the earliest point in the Scriptures that it is said that God filled someone with the Holy Spirit and the purpose is not prophecy or law-giving or speaking in tongues but the creation of art to the glory of God. Artists and craftspeople, take note! Our heritage is powerful and blessed.

I will not take the time this morning to trace the troubled history of art in the Church. Suffice it to say that through history there have been those who insisted on a strict adherence to the admonition against graven images and those who differentiated between idols and figurative art used as an aid to devotion. We certainly know that symbols such as the fish adorned Christian tombs as early as 150 years into the history of the Church and that Jesus was portrayed as the Good Shepherd not long after. Even in this congregation, we represent a wide variety of traditions on this point. I fall into the camp that points to Christ’s ongoing redemption of the whole of creation to say that any work of our Creator or the representation thereof is fit and proper to play a role in the worship of the Creator.

The fact that there have been squabbles in the history of the Church over the proper place of art in worship should in no way lead us to believe that art is too controversial for a church setting. After all, there have been and still are similar squabbles over the place of music in worship even though music has always been so much a part of the worship of God that our Bible contains an entire book of song lyrics. We call them the Psalms and sometimes we forget that this beautiful poetry would have been set to tunes simple enough to be sung easily by worshippers. Dare we call them “pop music?” Nehemiah records the importance of song leaders and musicians for the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile as they rebuilt the Temple of Yahweh. All of Judah rejoiced over them as much as over the priests and joyfully included them in the group for whom they were responsible to support with their tithes. In the matter of music in worship, to borrow a modern phrase, they voted with their checkbooks. Besides the Psalms, there are countless other examples of songs in both Old Testament and New. Many of the most moving passages in Paul’s letters are thought by scholars to be quotations by the apostle of hymns his audience would have known. And Paul is explicit in his enthusiasm for music as well. To the Ephesians, he wrote, “...be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In his Letter to the Colossians, he said, “...with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” One of the very first attestations to Christians in secular literature is a letter from Pliny, the Roman Governor of Bithynia (now in Turkey), to the Emperor Trajan: “...they were wont, on a stated day, to meet together before it was light, and to sing a hymn to Christ, as to a god...”

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From these Biblical and historical foundations regarding art and music in worship, let me now turn to some observations regarding current practices in worship as I experienced them particularly on my Sabbatical but also throughout my life. As some of you have seen during the Sunday School hour for the last two weeks, Connie and I encountered a marvelous variety of devotional art during our journeys. I come away from that experience convinced of at least two things. First, the power of visual art to move the observer to new heights of worship and to inspire the worshiper in new ways has not diminished with the advent of the third millennia of Christianity. Indeed, in what many are calling our “post-literate” society, striking visual art may be more important in expressing our deepest beliefs than at any time since the surge in literacy that came with Gutenberg’s press. Secondly, the age of great religious art is not buried in the past. While I still look with awe at medieval icons and Renaissance paintings, some of which we’ll look at in Sunday School next week, I find myself equally moved by the art of believers from the past century and of today. While the works of such artists as Sir Jacob Epstein were acclaimed as instant classics, I am positive that a representative percentage of work created in the last 50 years and by artists working now will be recognized over time as the equal of religious art from eras gone by. The Holy Spirit continues to fill the believer-artists of our time.

The slides of our Sabbatical journeys cannot, of course, capture the music of the worship we enjoyed in Europe but it was as wonderful as advertised at both Taizé and Iona. As many of you know, the music of Taizé is simple, almost chant-like, and repeated until the congregation sings by instinct allowing the mind to soar in contemplation and devotion. The hymns of Iona are much more like the hymns in our own hymnal – in fact there are hymns which appear in both. Many of the Iona hymns, though, have been written quite recently and the community of Iona continues to compose and publish. While the tunes are simply learned, for the most part, the words carry more of the burden, calling the worshipper to engage intellectually with the truths of our faith. In both Taizé and Iona, the hymnody has grown organically out of the tradition, experience and focus of the community. Each is right for their place but neither could be transposed for the other. At all of the congregations I visited close to home during my leave, the worship felt richest when the music chosen seemed to best fit the character of the congregation from the relative formality of the Presbyterians to the praise team-led service of the Free Methodists.

I’ve touched on the richness of our Biblical and ecclesial heritage in the arts and music as a reminder of how deeply the roots of these elements of worship go in our history but I doubt that I really have to encourage this congregation to take music and art seriously. This is, after all, a congregation that loves to sing, even if not all of you share my peculiar enthusiasm about singing all the verses. And the banners that so often adorn the walls of our Sanctuary and the other art throughout the building are witness to the honor you give to the artists in our midst. So the question is how do we connect the Scriptural mandates to utilize art and music, our own enthusiasm for these elements of worship and my recent experiences to reach toward new strategies for worship at Good Shepherd Baptist Church? I have, as you might suspect, a few modest suggestions.

First, as to music. Having now been exposed to the music of Iona, which I previously knew only by reputation, and having experienced the worship in Taizé after having attended several workshops and imitations here in the U.S., I am confident that we could fruitfully mount such

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services here at Good Shepherd. I can see at least two benefits from doing so periodically. Firstly, an occasional interruption of our habitual worship style could well serve as a catalyst to new spiritual experience for some or all of us. Even things we love can put us in an unproductive rut. Secondly, there is no regular Taizé-style service in our area and it may be that there are enough Taizé enthusiasts and people curious about Taizé that we could reach a new population. But I am also constrained by the notion I mentioned a moment ago; that is, that the worship forms at Taizé and Iona belong in a particular way to those communities. While we might reproduce those worship styles, it might be that they would continue to simply be reproductions rather than an authentic expression of the character of Good Shepherd Baptist Church.

We are not, after all, a gathering of ecumenical brothers, living in community with vows of chastity, poverty and obedience and surrounded by thousands of teens and twenty-somethings on a regular basis. Nor are we a scattered community which comes together only in parts to marry the heritage of one of the world's great spiritual sites with modern consciousness of peace and justice issues. We do not model our worship after the Rule of Benedict nor the Book of Common Prayer. Instead, we are a community of diverse believers gathered by choice in this suburb of a great American metropolis. Our combined heritage of worship includes both pre- and post-Vatican II Catholicism, a variety of Lutheran expressions, Pentecostal denominations and, of course, an array of Baptist traditions. We are hymn-singers and chorus-lovers, adherents of Bach and of Bono, harmonizers and hand-wavers. Our situation is every bit as unique as that at Taizé or on Iona.

With this in mind, I have had conversations with the Board of Deacons and with our Deacon of Worship, Dale Sutton, in particular. We are agreed that it would be useful to convene a taskforce on worship to meet several times over the next few months. Among the questions to be considered will be how we can honor the diversity of tradition and preference among us. Can we, in the terms of our Anglican brothers and sisters, include both "High Church" and "Low Church" expressions in our worship to the benefit of all? What in our habitual form of worship *must* we keep? What can come and go according to season and need? Can Taizé and Iona styles be integrated or are they best used in separate services? If the latter, how often should we practice such worship? Can we carefully create a worship template that is the best expression of who Good Shepherd is and how will that change as membership in our local Body of Christ changes? If you are intrigued by these questions or excited about ideas that they stir in you, I encourage you to contact Dale to let him know you would be available for our new Worship Taskforce.

That Taskforce may also take up questions of décor. I want to issue a separate call to the artists among us. We have a fine tradition of banners in our building but it has been some time since we had any new ones created. I know there has been conversation about new banners but I think the last ones actually executed were in my first year among you. So, visual artists who work with pencil and paint, with cloth and thread, with stencil and stamp, will you also accept the call to meet together and begin dreaming your dreams together again? I know that there is pent-up creative energy in this body. Let me encourage you to let it loose for the glory of God.

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Finally, I want to mention another project to reinvigorate our artistic surroundings which will need a time of some incubation before it becomes a reality. Our Congregation President, Joye Melby, and I have had some conversations about this but it will need more of Joye's attention than is available right now. The design of our Sanctuary and the renovation of our other spaces have left us with a number of primarily blank walls. Joye and I have both looked at these empty spaces, these blank canvases, and dreamed of them filled with art. Between us and some others in our congregation, we have a multitude of contacts with artists in our community. We are aware that, in many cities, there are galleries devoted to art with spiritual or religious themes but there is none in this area, despite an abundance of galleries and commercial spaces given over to exhibitions in Lynnwood and Edmonds. We believe that, with a modest investment in gallery-style hardware, we could entice area artists to work with us to mount a series of rotating exhibitions of spiritually-themed art. This would both enhance our worship and gathering spaces and give artists and arts patrons a reason to visit our building. Perhaps they would find community here in addition to hanging space.

Did you know I was going to come back from my time away and start making trouble? Those of you who know me well probably guessed something like this might happen. I am excited about what is possible in this place, among us who love art and music and God. Our Loving Creator, it is written, created humankind in God's own image and to many scholars and artists over the millennia that has meant that God made us to be creators also; creators in imitation of the Creator, bringing our dreams and visions to reality in song and paint, in word and stone, and co-creators with God, bringing the creation of God closer and closer to that which God has always intended, which some call the Kingdom of God and some call the Beloved Community. My sisters and brothers, let us sing a new song and draw a new future. The name of Christ, touching the deepest parts of us, brings forth from us melody and harmony of sound and line and color. God is with us; how can we keep from singing and dancing and sewing and imagining, all to the glory of God? Let us open ourselves to God's creative, loving, joyful presence and allow God to use us as vessels of the holy in music and in art. Amen.