

“The Hazards of Going to Church”

a sermon by

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**Text: “When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more.” (Isaiah 1:12)**

This past Tuesday I had the opportunity to be a part of a class at Davidson College that was focusing on “Protestant and Catholic Ethics.” I was invited by one of the professors, Dr. Doug Ottati, to speak on the subject of ethics from the perspective of the Presbyterian or Reformed heritage.

After the class I had the chance to speak to several of the students, several of whom were religion majors. One of the questions that was raised was the wide variation of worship within churches today. One student had visited a church in Charlotte that was very contemporary. The minister preached a sermon based on the popular book “The Shack” and the music included a recording by Paul McCartney. Other students had visited churches that were far more traditional, but all seemed puzzled by the wide divergence that is present in worship today.

I.

When one looks at the way worship is viewed in the Old and New Testament, it is clear that there are two very contrasting views of worship. One is, of course positive. Throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel are called to worship the one God of Israel. The writer of Psalm 100 echoes a chorus that is heard throughout the Old Testament:

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.” (Psalm 100: 1-2)

On a number of occasions in the New Testament, we read that Jesus went to the Synagogue, as was his custom. The Apostle Paul warns “Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the custom of some is.”

There is, however, another view of worship in Scripture that is quite negative. In Isaiah 1 we read that the prophet attacked the false worship of his people. This is what worship had denigrated into. In this passage, God rails his opposition to worship that is false and substitutes for true religion. The offerings of Israel to God are to no avail. The new moons and festivals God despises. When the people pray to him, God does not listen.

Jesus himself pictured a Pharisee going up to the Temple to pray. Jesus went on to say that the Pharisee stood in the Temple and prayed, “Lord, I thank you that I am not like the rest of men, tax collectors, thieves and sinners.” One of the most sarcastic things that Jesus ever said about anyone was about people who, as he put it, “love to stand and pray in the synagogues.”

On one occasion, the New Testament tells us that Jesus spoke to a crowded sanctuary in Nazareth about racial goodwill, about God’s grace caring for the Syrians and Sidonians just as much as for the Jews. All the churchgoers that day, we read, “rose up and cast him forth out of the city.” You see the point I am getting at. According to the Bible, some of God’s worst trouble has been with churchgoers.

II.

Now don’t get me wrong. I take it for granted that those of us who have gathered here this morning know what church-going at its best can mean. It can bring inner reinforcement, clear vision of duty, restored faith and courage. Sometimes we come in to worship faltering and go out “strengthened by God’s spirit in the inner person.” That is worship at its best.

The prophet Isaiah understood this kind of worship. In Isaiah, chapter six, we read of the call of this prophet. He was worshipping in the Temple in Jerusalem, when he saw the Lord high and lifted up. It was in the temple that Isaiah heard God say, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” The prophet responded by saying, “Here am I. Send me.”

But Isaiah, like Amos, saw a kind of worship that was empty and without meaning. He saw people who brought sacrifices to the Temple, participated in the great feasts and festivals of the Temple, prayed to God with open hands. But their lives were empty and void of real faith. They trampled the poor. They ignored the orphan and the widow – those who were most helpless in Israel’s society.

So worship is a two-sided affair.

III.

But we would certainly be remiss if we did not acknowledge the great positive influence that worship brings to all of us. This past summer, I visited the small church in Brunswick, Maine across the street from Bowdoin College. In one of the pews is a plaque that marks the place where Harriet Beecher Stowe worshipped in that church. It was during the course of a worship service that she received the inspiration to write a novel she entitled *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a book that probably did more to end the practice of slavery than any other event.

That event has been repeated on many other occasions. One of the most famous missionaries of the Nineteenth Century was a physician, Dr. Wilfred Grenfell, who for many years was a medical missionary in Labrador. His call to this important mission came to him in a church. He was worshipping in the church where Dwight L. Moody was the minister. It could not have been a very dignified affair. At one point Moody asked one of the ministers to pray – and he did, for over an hour. Finally, Moody stood up and said, “While the brother is finishing his prayer, let us sing Hymn #161.” But something happened in that worship service and Grenfell really worshipped God that day, so that finding his worst self confronted by his best self, and his better self confronted by Christ, he went out a changed person, determined to make his life count for the Kingdom of God. Worship can do that to a person.

So let us be clear. One of the major functions of our worship is to offer to people the kind of comfort that only God can give. If there is someone within the sound of my voice that needs this kind of inner serenity, then I hope that something in this worship service may reflect the words of Christ, who said, “Peace I leave you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, give I to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

But Christian worship is more than peace. It is not a lullaby, but a challenge to character. One of the hazards of worship is that it can offer a false kind of peace that does not confront us with the moral realities of our lives and our society, but dulls those sensitivities. No wonder Lenin called religion the “opiate of the people.”

Through the years, there are those individuals who have found in worship not just comfort, but a challenge to their lives. Today, I hope that there is someone here who needs the kind of moral challenge that only worship can provide. Perhaps there is someone here who is struggling with some form of addiction, someone who is in a relationship that he or she knows is not healthy, someone who is facing a severe ethical challenge in their professional or business life.

IV.

There is, however, another hazard of coming to church, and it is that often churches are the source of some of the most disturbing things in our society: bigotry, sectarianism, often promoting social and racial prejudice instead of standing against it. Gene Owens, who for a number of years was the minister at Myers Park Baptist Church, used to say that in the South everything bad and everything good came out of the churches.

Jesus experienced this. He preached in his home town of Nazareth on one Sabbath. But the gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus preached a sermon that made everyone mad. He spoke of a universal God who cared about all people – not just Israel. He went on to appeal to the religious heritage of the Jews. He pointed that there were many widows in Israel but the prophet Elijah had been sent to the widow of Sidon, many lepers in Israel but Elisha healed Naaman the Syrian. He tried to get the citizens of his town to understand what the prophet Malachi meant when he cried, “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created all of us?”

That is what Jesus was thinking when he later told the story of the “Good Samaritan.” Most of us think of this as a beautiful story, and it is. The fresco in the lobby of our fellowship

hall depicts this parable. But most of us cannot understand the great offense that this parable gave to Jesus' hearers. It was an attack on their religion. A priest and a Levite, two of their most prominent religious leaders, passed by this man who was injured. They were traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. No doubt they had visited the Temple in Jerusalem and worshipped God. But they passed by a man who was injured. Apparently, they saw no connection between worship and human need. It was a Samaritan, a man who had never visited the Temple in Jerusalem, a man whose race they despised, who tended to the wounded man. Make no mistake about it, Jesus could be very severe on churchgoers.

Once a famous minister asked Mahatmas Gandhi, "What is the greatest enemy that Jesus Christ has in India?" Gandhi answered, "Christianity."

So let us all be careful to understand what our worship stands for. There is much criticism today of the mainline Protestant denominations. But there is much for which we can be grateful.

This year marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, who is the father of the Presbyterian Church. Many people are critical of Calvin. He is often identified with Puritanism and often pictured as hardened and intolerant person. Few people have influenced the Western World as did Calvin. At age 26, he wrote a book *The Christian Institutes*, which even today stands as one of the most definitive statements of the Protestant faith. Calvin not only wrote a book, he shaped the life of the entire city of Geneva, Switzerland, where his ministry took place. Calvin was convinced that the church had a ministry to shape the life of an entire city to conform to the principals of the New Testament.

Today, our city desperately needs Christian women and men who will commit themselves to the common welfare. In the midst of this terrible recession, we are reminded again of how important it is for our churches to reflect the ministry of Christ: feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless, working to insure a good education for every child in our city.

All of us know how grievous the church can fail, and it is easy for people to give up on the church. But can you imagine our lives without the church? Let Jesus become a myth, the message of the Bible forgotten, faith in God, nebulous, worship finished, no more sacred music, only secular; no more religious education, only secular.

May God grant that our worship will fill our lives that we may love you and serve and our community as well.

Amen.