

The Value of Church Today

Summer 2008

Celebrating our Creation:

At the beginning of our Sacred Writings we read, "In the beginning, God....." This is an important piece for recognizing who we are. Have you noticed, in recent years especially, the angst that many adopted persons have to know their birth parents? For humans it seems that such knowledge may be helpful. It is not only to know who they are but also to become more acquainted with their identity so as to become more aware of their roots. All of us know how important history is to understanding our humanity and to moving forward in our lives.

Further, what does it mean that we are, "created in the image of God"? Too often we only think of this image in outward and visible terms, but I am speaking here about a basic understanding of the invisible majesty of the essence of all that is. When Moses was communicating with God on the mountain he asked, "whom shall I say sent me"; and "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am . This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' " [NIV] The verb to be is very important to our language and to know who I AM is also extremely valuable. Connecting to that very Source of energy is crucial as we center in on who we are and what we are to become.

I believe it is also valuable to recognize that there is an energy and a force in our heritage. People who seem to feel that they are "number one" are often very lonely and lacking in their character development. Even our popular music reminds us "people who need people are the luckiest people in the world". How much more important might it be to have awareness of a "source" that is above us, behind us, within us, and that surrounds us as we live and move and have our being?

I enjoy the stories in Scripture that remind us that we have an example. Our young people especially, who are in their period of formation as they mature, look to "role models" to energize this process. I am not sure that there is ever a time in our lives when we lose that need. My point here is that God, the creator source for all that is, rested on the 7th day. I love it when leadership provides an example. We certainly do not appreciate the attitude from leadership that tells us, "do as I say and not as I do". How refreshing to learn from an honored Source that Sabbath is necessary to a good life.

Keeping our lives centered and focused:

Most people recognize that we are not the center of the Universe. It is clear that we are probably not the most important person in our family, community or the world. On the other hand, we should not neglect our own worth and importance to others and ourselves. Keeping a balance as to how we "fit in" may be another reason why we need Church. A healthy church community will enable us to "live into" this important balance for our lives.

One of the assets of our churches in the Anglican Communion and especially in the Episcopal Church in the United States is our collective recognition of balance. I often remind people that Oxford and Cambridge are still primary educational resources and are primary to our history. It is important to know that no one who attends Oxford or Cambridge is ever told "what to think" but is given the tools to learn "how to think". How sad it is for any community to pretend that they have all the answers since that often stifles the need for creative questions.

There are three areas or aspects to our church that form the foundation of our progressive and inclusive stance: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. We can see the importance of Scripture in our church because we read from four sections of our Bible as we worship together; the Hebrew Scripture, the Psalms, with two sections from the Christian Scriptures; the Epistle and the Gospel. We should also point out that these selections for each Sunday are chosen from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary that is a shared schedule of Scripture readings for worship by about 30 denominations).

When it comes to tradition we are often referred to as "the bridge church". We use the Book of Common Prayer for Celebrating the Sacraments and other prayer offices. We are a Church with Bishops, Priests, and Deacons but our polity includes the voices and votes of the Laity as well. While many of our churches are rather ceremonial in the Western Catholic Tradition we also have services that are informal

with a variety in styles of music. The Anglican Communion is worldwide with the Archbishop of Canterbury as a Titular head but not under a leader like the Pope who determines policy and polity in the Roman Catholic Church. In many ways then you can begin to see why we are somewhat of a “bridge” between Protestant and Catholic traditions.

Reason is the vital segment that keeps us up-to-date with our world so that we can continue to give progressive leadership in areas of Morals and Ethics. We recognize that our times are different from former times and continue to change even more rapidly as time moves us forward. Reason, along with Scripture and Tradition, allows us to make essential changes from a First Century faith to one that is continually adapting an understanding and spirit for our modern times.

Tools for growth and progress:

There are many tools that are necessary for growth and progress: too many to speak about here. Some basic ones are simple to name but complex in their pursuit; education, community, prayer, consultation, team, leadership, involvement and many other ways in which we improve ourselves.

Perhaps the most valuable tool is to be humble and open. Our attitude and spirit in life is absolutely essential for anyone who wishes to grow and make progress. These are people who more naturally form teams and become leaders. They tend to give more than they try to take. The prophet Zachariah says, “not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord”. God’s spirit in us prevents us from becoming haughty and selfish. It reminds us that we are not better than anyone else and that we need more than ourselves to become all that we can be. I also thought of an older Hymn we used to sing when I was growing up:

“Open my eyes that I may see glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp, and set me free.

Open my ears, that I may hear voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wave-notes fall on my ear, ev’ry thing false will disappear.

Open my mouth and let me bear gladly the warm truth ev’ry where;
Open my heart and let me prepare love with Thy children thus to share.

Silently now I wait for Thee, ready my God, Thy will to see;
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!”

[By: Charles H. Scott]

How wonderful it would be if we all kept our sensory mechanisms open and ready to receive all that we need and in quiet assurance recognized the presence of God in us and in others.

Worship Deprivation Disorder:

How do we “stay in shape”? This question is becoming a real part of our conscious experience today. We are beginning to discover that wellness is much more important and effective than simply treating an illness when we become sick. We are also beginning to celebrate that we can live longer, healthier, and more vibrant lives. We are recognizing that healing is a natural and normal part of creation as long as we focus on healing principles and practice wholesome ways.

There are many illnesses or conditions that we have identified that are often referred to as disorders. Unfortunately, when it comes to spiritual and emotional life forces, we do not seem to be as completely aware nor as attentive. I believe that one of the most neglected of these may be, what I call, Worship Deprivation Disorder. It may be a real surprise to you and perhaps the first time you have been asked to think about it and to acknowledge it. I hope you will see how pervasive it is in our societies today and how much it affects our individual lives.

What are the symptoms? Read your newspapers or watch the news on TV. Most of what is reported is not very attractive and what is reported is only a small amount in comparison to the overall volume. Everyone seems to agree that it appears to be getting worse and not better. Those who commit such atrocities are growing younger and exist among every strata of society. The symptoms are all around us every minute of every day.

Someone has warned, "if we do not come apart we will come apart". I believe that we are literally falling apart today because we provide no time for worship. We are hardly aware of any one of greater importance than ourselves and spend most of our time "looking out for number one". Our world is filled with greed and self-satisfaction to such an extent that community life no longer exists. There used to be large organizations and community groups that were called "service clubs" like Rotary, Kiwanis, Elks, Masons, Knights of Columbus to name a few. The ones that exist today have very few members. Even families are hardly together for daily family meals and conversation so that many parents and children are almost virtual strangers.

Even our schools are diminishing in influence as centers for learning in either academics or social graces. They have become, in many ways, war zones rather than fostering the dignity and worth of every human being.

We desperately need to reclaim community and worship, especially as it was in America when it was a primary way to gather folk together in special and informal ways to maintain great communities.

A Resource for Love and Community:

Worship is truly a resource for love and community. It is not the only resource however, but it has been a primary place for people to come together to acknowledge that there is a Higher Power. There are hardly people anywhere in the world who do not practice some form of worship. Our beliefs and practices may vary, but worship is still a part of the lives among many people everywhere. Could it be that as coming together in worship decreases we have an increase in violence?

Worship is that holy time to remind us that we are the people of God, the primary source of all that was, is, and will be. Without this regular time to remind us to be grateful for the gift of life we share with one another it is very easy for us to become greedy so as to grab all we can get for ourselves. Without this resource for love and community on a regular basis we simply become weak. Love is necessary for every human being and is essential for strength of character and respect.

In plain English I believe that our tanks are running on empty. The finest automobile that is in excellent shape will do us no good without a full tank! The same is true with humanity; the best person in excellent shape, even with a full stomach, will not go far in life without love and respect.

Perhaps here is where I need to say that, unfortunately, not all churches are loving communities. Churches can be cold and judgmental. Those churches who are familiar with God's love and grace and deliberately live in that experience as God's people through mutual experience will be more prone to share a holy, loving, and open community.

It is also important to note that worship is only the beginning and primary function for resource. All of us have a variety of experiences and needs that may be assisted by open and loving people. Life is difficult for most of us and the support of an extended family of friends can be very helpful. The sharing of mutual experience and support that comes from those who truly care can benefit us in immeasurable ways.

A Reinforcement and Reminder:

Depending of the size and life experience of a church community, there can be an infinite variety of opportunities, challenges and support. Just to hear an honest and informed opinion from someone you can trust is a very valuable opportunity. Conversations of this nature can reinforce or bring challenge to our thoughts, especially when they are offered freely without an expectation that we perform according to their way of thinking. We are also enhanced in our personal standing when others wish to hear from us in the same way. This kind of mature exchange of ideas can be most helpful and supportive.

How good it is to be supported by those around us who have our best interest at heart. Those who would more often remind us of how far we have come and how much further we can go in life than the company of people who are more apt to criticize and judge. People who don't just tell you that you are loved and welcome, but who demonstrate it by their conversation and friendship. Warm and radical welcome is the hallmark of a good church regardless of its size. It is in these informal yet intense times that we gain the trust to hear words of challenge and reminder for change and growth in our lives. Only from people who show us true respect by their actions can we receive the honest reinforcement and reminder each of us regularly needs.

In closing we might remember this, "to make progress in your life, attend a progressive church". Help yourself and enable others in the world around us to benefit from the warm and loving welcome of a vital congregation.