

St. James' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Cindy O. Baskin

Proper 18-B: September 06, 2009 - Labor Day Weekend

Texts: Is 35:4-7a; Ps 146; James 1:1-10 [11-13] 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Scripture: From Psalm 46: *I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.*

During July, we held a funeral service here at St. James' for Joyce Bennett, a member of our congregation. As Joyce was originally from Sierra Leone, it's not surprising that the church was filled with her friends and family - most of whom were either from Sierra Leone or were African Americans. As the guest organist began the introduction to the first hymn, *The Strife is O'er*, my heart sank, because he was playing the introduction so slowly I thought this great Easter hymn would die before the end of the first verse! But then that congregation began to sing - and Oh my! - What an experience!! The walls were reverberating with the sound, I thought the roof was going to come off, and within three-four measures, my own heart and soul were sailing as I participated in the singing of that great hymn. The tempo made no difference! What made the difference was how a congregation came together and sang with purpose, with intention, and yes, with great gusto.

For some time, our Worship Commission, which met just last Tuesday, has been discussing what we can do here at St. James' to enhance our Sunday morning worship. We've been concerned that many families seem to treat summer Sundays as a vacation from worship when there is less of a formal Sunday School program. I've been concerned that our average Sunday attendance at worship has remained mostly level over the past three years, even while our over all active membership has increased from year to year by between 8-10%. Families and our Sunday School coordinators have asked that we find ways to make worship more accessible to children. All sorts of things have been suggested from using more "up beat music," to abbreviating the liturgy to make to service shorter, to "what can we do about the rather lengthy Prayers of the People?" . . . These concerns led to an attempt during the Sundays of July to be more intentional about having the 10:30 am service be more "family friendly." But the concerns continued, and, after my experience at the funeral, I began to suspect the issue may perhaps be larger than the style of music or the length of the liturgy. Perhaps the issue has more to do with a rather lackadaisical approach with which many of us come into worship in the first place.

Not long after our highschool youth returned from their work camp experience in Pennsylvania this past June, I had a conversation with our youth director, Don Mullins. Don shared how the work campers had stopped on a Saturday night at an Episcopal church in Paoli, Pennsylvania at the end of their work week. The group all went to worship at that church the next day. Don reports that the high schoolers loved the worship service and came out from it saying things like, "Wow, that's the way church ought to be!"

After my first defensive reaction to this statement (no rector wants to hear that some other church might be doing things better than we are) I swallowed my pride and asked Don what the difference was between that congregation and what we do here at St. James'. Was it because that was a much larger congregation (which it is - Don estimated the Paoli congregation to be about double our attendance)? Did they use contemporary music that's more attractive to youth? Had they modified the liturgy somehow to be more "accessible"? Or what?

Don had brought back a copy of the service bulletin which he gave me to look at. What surprised me as I reviewed it is that all the music was from the 1982 hymnal - traditional hymns! And the service was a regular, Rite II Holy Eucharist, straight out of the Prayer Book.

So what caused the difference that led our high schoolers to say, “Wow, that’s the way church ought to be. In further conversation with Don I learned that this Pennsylvania congregation had a song leader up front, singing into a microphone and leading the congregation in its singing. They also used projection screens upon which they projected the words of any songs or hymns they sang.

Though these particular vehicles may help congregational worship somewhat, I suspect the biggest difference may derive from something else – namely, a cultural expectation inherent in that congregation: *that if you come to worship you come to participate fully!* And participating fully means singing the hymns even if you don’t think you can sing, praying the prayers even if they seem long, and entering fully into the worship experience. Somehow that Paoli congregation has fostered and inculcated a culture of vibrant participation in worship.

I want to remind everyone that WORSHIP is central to being a Christian. Worship is what we’re about. And, as most of us know, music and singing is central to worship. Biblical writers knew the power of music to uplift the soul and edify us human beings. The book of Psalms is the bible’s song book. Right in the middle of the bible is an entire song book. And with it is the call, as we read in today’s Psalm *to praise the Lord as long as I live; I will **sing** praises to my God while I have my being* (vs. 1). Four different Psalms exhort us to *Make a Joyful **NOISE*** to the Lord (and please note: the exhortation is to make a joyful NOISE - there’s nothing about having to make a beautiful sound.)

In the reading from Isaiah this morning, we heard: “*and the tongue of the speechless [will] sing for joy.*” And in the reading from James, we read, “*So faith by itself, if it has no **works**, is dead* (2:17). Do you know from what the word “liturgy” comes? It comes from the Greek word, *leitourgia*, which means “public service” or “the **work** of the people.” Liturgy, what we do and say in worship, is the **work** of the worshipping congregation in community.

Every culture has music with singing and dancing at the center of its life – in its rituals and celebrations – because music has the power to touch us deeply. We Christians know this, which is why music and singing is so central to much of Christian worship.

Nonetheless, I am fully aware that music is not for everyone. Some people find music, any kind of music, to be a distraction and intrusive to their worship. When I was in Richmond, one very active member of the church (the altar guild chair) approached me one day and told me that she always attended the 8 am service, not because she liked the hour, but because she found any kind of music disruptive to her worship experience. That particular congregation did not have music at its 8:00 service. So I know that’s true for some people, but for a very small number of folks.

For most of us music is central to our being, whether we hum or whistle or sing. The reason for that is because music cuts through. Music uses a different aspect of our brain that cuts through some of the intellectual processing and sometimes it cuts through right down to the very depths of our soul. As a result, when we sing or play music, it has the power to release from within us our very spirit. Thus, singing can be a very vulnerable experience and leave us feeling very exposed. Singing is a very personal experience. When we sing, each of us makes our “own” sound, not someone else’s. So **singing can be very intimidating**, even those who like to sing. If we’re unsure about our singing ability or feeling less than confident, we’ll probably feel uncomfortable singing out in a group if we suspect someone else might hear us. After all, none of us want to be ridiculed or laughed at. And it doesn’t help that some of us may have had negative experiences during our life’s journey that have made a lasting impression: the adolescent boy who was laughed at by his friends when his voiced began to change; the young

child who was told by a teacher not to sing in the class performance because she couldn't match pitch yet. All too often, those who have had these kinds of negative experiences carry the impressions right into adulthood. Unfortunately, the pronouncement, "You can't sing," heard as a child often carries forward into a personal belief, now stated as "I can't sing" – a sort of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

As a musician, I can't begin to tell you how aggravated I get when I hear someone say, "I can't sing." It's no different than me saying, "I can't draw." Now it's true, I can't draw as well as a Craig English or a Bess Gonglewski or others of you. And it's also true that it would be foolish for me to pursue a career as an artist. But it's NOT true that I can't draw at all. Likewise, there are very, very few people who can't sing at all! Maybe not all of us can sing as well as those folks who join the choir. But 99% of us can indeed sing in some way, shape or form. We just need to open our mouths and try!

We at St. James' already enjoy decent corporate worship, but I and the worship leadership of this congregation believe it can be even better. We want to move from comparative lackluster congregational involvement to greater corporate participation. In other words, we want St. James' to become a vibrant, singing congregation.

I believe we all want worship that is inspiring and praiseworthy of the God we've come here to meet. And our more intentional and full participation in all of our liturgy can help to make that happen, including a more robust singing of our hymns. The style of music or the tempo or the kind of instrumental support doesn't matter nearly as much as the degree to which you and I participate and give it all we've got.

To better enable this, our worship leadership is going to make some slight changes in an attempt to decrease the intimidation factor that keeps some of us from singing more fully during worship. Beginning today, we are providing a song leader who will sing the hymns into a microphone, thereby providing a solid lead for the rest of us to follow. Just last Tuesday, one member of the Worship Commission (who would not count herself as a musician) commented that it's much easier for her to follow and sing with a human voice than with the organ or another instrumental lead. Did you know that our congregational singing is actually better during summer months than during the regular year? Have you ever wondered why? We have smaller over all attendance during the summer, yet better congregational singing. That's because choir members are spread out among you all. There are more voices to follow and this improves everyone's singing. As more people sing out, it decreases the intimidation factor for everyone.

So that's why we're going to start by providing a song leader. Newton's intention is to rotate the song leading role among several members of the choir. Cheryl is aiding us today, but she's not up here to perform or to sing a solo; she's here to help all of us sing out with more confidence.

But it will take more than just having a song leader to improve our congregational singing. The biggest change must come from us who sit in the pews. For us to have more inspiring worship that will draw newcomers and our own youth will require that all of us recognize our own role in fully participating and singing praises to our God in all aspects of our liturgy. Can you do that? Will you sing out even if you're a little uncomfortable? Are you willing, even if you're not too familiar with a hymn or a song to give it a shot, perhaps croaking or groaning yet still adding your voice to the praises of God's people gathered here? And then we'll see what happens as God's Spirit joins with our voices in worship to our God.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus takes aside a man who is deaf and cannot **spea**k clearly, much less sing. He touches this man's ears and his tongue, and then says, "**Ephphatha**" – an

Aramaic term meaning “Be opened.” And Mark tells us that immediately *his ears were opened, his tongue released, and he spoke plainly*. I suspect this man also went away singing praises and thanksgivings to God, his creator. Perhaps some of us need to hear Jesus’ command, “Ephphatha,” . . . “Be opened” . . . when it comes to our participation in liturgy and worship, and particularly in our singing. That’s my prayer for our congregation. I want to see us become a transformed congregation so that when we all walk out of here on any Sunday morning, we too shall go out saying, “Wow! That’s the way church ought to be.”