

St. Paul's Congregational Church
September 17, 2017; Matthew 18:15-20, Romans 13:8-14 Proper 18A
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

What would you say is the mission of the church: according to the gospel of Matthew, it's to go and make disciples. And how does the church fulfill that mission: through worship, teaching, and service – that image of a three legged stool helps us see the need for balance in each of these arenas.

We've been taking some time last week and this week to re-dedicate our ministry here at St. Paul's as we begin a new program year. Last week we had the pleasure of hearing Eileen Painter from Nutley Family Service Bureau as we dedicated our Ministry of Service.

Today we dedicated our education/teaching ministry – a ministry that involves ALL of us, not only our children and youth. We're all teachers and learners of the faith: that's a lifelong journey.

Today we dedicate our worship ministry – all that happens here when we gather as the Body of Christ. We receive the gift of music from our choir, we give the gifts of our time, talent, and treasure, we savor the gift of the sacraments, the ancient Christian story, our times of prayer of thanksgiving, intercession, and dedication. Hopefully, we don't attend worship to squeeze God into our busy lives – we attend worship to meld our lives into God's. It's a time when we think less about ourselves and more about faith; less about our personal agendas and more about God's will. God uses worship to ground us, to transform lives, heal our wounds, renew hope, shape decisions, inspire compassion, and bind us one to another and to God.

And the reality is, worship experiences include not only Sunday mornings but also funerals, weddings, any time we gather as people of God to do God's work. That means it includes our ministry meetings, our annual meetings too, our fellowship hours each week – whenever we are gathered as the People of God at St. Paul's.

And worship is not just a spectator sport - worship is meant to engage all of us – not just the preacher, the choir – it's meant to engage us all. God's presence and call is for each and every one of us.

From the earliest accounts of faith, people gathered to sing, pray, listen for God's word – share a common meal. The very word "synagogue" means "to bring together." The Greek word for church - "ecclesia" means "called out of the world" – and refers to the calling of people from their ordinary life to gather together in sacred time and space and turn to God. Worship breathes life into the community of Christ's followers, forms an identity, and provides a place of common experience and learning – it doesn't matter what we do or who we are or what our experiences are when we're away from this place – here, we all have in common that we're children of God, loved by God, called by God – trying to find God, know God, and serve God. It's in worship where we focus on God, not ourselves – it's in worship where we can allow our perspective to change, to broaden, to transform us. It's in worship where we are fed and where we feed others.

Worship touches all of us in different ways - can you think of a time when you've really experienced the presence of God here in this place? When you've been pulled out of your ordinary life in an extraordinary way? Maybe through the music – by the Integrity Choir, by the voices of children singing, by our wonderful Chancel Choir. Maybe it was when Eileen Painter told her story of the Nutley Family Service Bureau. Maybe when one of our youth read scripture or led prayer or perhaps when you participated in worship leadership for the first time. Through the sacrament of Baptism or Communion. At a special service – Christmas Eve, Maundy Thursday, World Communion Sunday. Or maybe it's a Bible passage you heard in a new way on a "regular" Sunday morning, the words of a prayer you heard that touched you. How did you feel when you left? How did that worship empower you to go about your daily life, strengthened, changed, transformed. How did that worship experience inform your desire to be a more faithful disciple of Christ? And then, how did that worship experience make you want to share with others? When were you so touched by the Spirit that you couldn't help but tell someone about it?

God reaches out to us not only in beautiful sanctuaries and simple buildings but also in storefront gathering places, in hospital chapels, outdoors, grocery stores, even in our work places and in homes. That's where the intersection of worship, teaching, and service happens – also times when you may be profoundly touched by the sense of the presence of God.

And the service component of worship – some folks experience that intersection in profound ways as well – that is certainly true for me. In Glen Ridge we were working hard to find opportunities for hands-on participation in mission outreach – we couldn't all go on mission trips to South Africa or Haiti, we couldn't all build houses for Habitat for Humanity. We had a box to receive food donations in the back of the sanctuary, but it wasn't well filled. We made a connection finally with MEND – Meeting Emergency Needs with Dignity, a network of food pantries and soup kitchens in Essex County and learned that there was a church in Bloomfield who served a large number of individuals and families whose food supply was seriously depleted. I was able to connect with the woman in charge and told her that we had some food that had been donated - could I bring it over to her. And I told her that we had some people who wanted to volunteer in a soup kitchen – could she use our help. There was a silence at the other end of the phone and she said, "Could you bring it today?" They were handing out food that day and people would soon be arriving to get help feeding their families from their meager stock at the pantry. And, they had lost some of their volunteers and the few remaining staff were left to prepare and provide the weekly meals at the soup kitchen.

I loaded the food in my car and headed out to the small church in Bloomfield – a mile and a half from my home. When I got there two men came out and carried the food inside for me as I met LeWanda, the director, face to face. They were serving meals that day – men, women, children. It smelled wonderful in there. And I looked at the food bank, housed in their sanctuary no less – they were in desperate need of cereal, canned fruit, canned vegetables, canned meats. I asked about the staple food of many children: peanut butter and jelly. She said that jelly must be getting more expensive – they couldn't give out both peanut butter and jelly any more – they didn't have enough. All of a sudden those news stories I'd read about the desperate times in Food Banks, shortages

of donations - those stories had a face as I met in person our neighbors who need our help. A mile and a half from my home.

If worship is defined as calling people out of their ordinary lives into sacred space and sacred presence, this excursion to Bloomfield was truly worship for me. When I left there I was exhausted and energized at the same time. Sure, I have bills to pay, a mortgage – but when I left there to go to the Pathmark I realized I had so much – that I could afford the cost of buying some additional items to go to the Food Bank.

And at Pathmark I also realized in a new way that worship connects us with each other too – when I met a friend there from church I couldn't help but tell her about my experience that afternoon. She said, you know, I forget. I'm glad we met here – I forget when I'm here for a couple of things I need – it just doesn't enter my mind that there are people around me who are hungry. She bought a box of cereal and some soup along with what she needed for her family. Imagine, an experience of worship in the aisles of the Pathmark.

Maybe we have to get out of ourselves and look to God for an assurance that lasts, an assurance that's real, an assurance, a hope, that will carry us through all of the dark days of our living. And I believe that assurance comes through worship – a reconnection between ourselves and God. An openness to God's work in our lives. A willingness to turn our cares and anxieties over to God, trusting that God will provide what we need – not necessarily what we want, but what we need. And a willingness to let God work through us to serve each other, each of us children of God.

I invite you to join me in that experience of worship at the Pathmark or the Shop Rite or wherever we gather – it struck me as I thought back on this experience that the worship didn't happen when I was alone – the worship depended on being aware of the presence of God and sharing it with other people – at the Soup Kitchen/Food Bank, at the Pathmark and here in this sanctuary.

That's why we are called to gather together in worship – we need each other, we need to be aware of the presence of God – we need relationship with each other and with God for true worship, don't we. We need to be grounded and we can't do that by ourselves. We need to be together, sharing worship, receiving the sacraments, singing, praying, hearing God's word and empower each other and ourselves to serve and love God every day of our lives.

Of course, I've experienced the presence of God in nature, when I'm alone, in time of personal devotion, private prayer, meditation. But both community worship and personal devotion depend on each other – they complement and reinforce one another, adding richness to the experience of both. And they empower us to go forth, secure in the knowledge of the love and care of God who will never let us down in good times and in bad. Where two or three are gathered, God is there.

God reaches out to us – in the ordinary dealings of our lives and here in this place. Imagine the possibilities for us as we nurture the being of our faith as our priority! Let us teach our children and young people and each other the Stories of our Faith. Let us serve God by loving and serving our neighbors! And let us worship God!