

The Announcements
Second in a Series about Worship
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: Romans 16:1-4
1 Corinthians 16:1-4
2 Tim 4:9-14
1 Thessalonians 5:26-28

September 14, 2014

Listen to the Word of God as it comes to us from Paul's letters to the early church.

To the Romans:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

To the Church at Corinth:

Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. ²On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so

that collections need not be taken when I come. ³And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

To Timothy, whom Paul mentored:

⁹Do your best to come to me soon, ¹⁰for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. ¹²I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. ¹³When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. ¹⁴Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds.

To the church at Thessalonica:

²⁶Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. ²⁷I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. ²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

THE WORD OF THE LORD/ Thanks be to God.¹

In their faithful attention to the details, I imagine just about every church Worship Committee, at one point or another, debates the Announcements and where they should come in the Order of Service. Sometimes they are lumped together with the pastoral concerns just before the Prayers of the People. That way the service is only interrupted once with the particularities of the day. In some churches they are shared as the young children leave the sanctuary, since that is a natural pause in the service anyway. The Announcements become what our liturgy calls “the Sending Hymn.”

No one ever complains if the Announcements are too brief, but if the service goes five minutes past the hour, the length of the announcements is a likely suspect. We have strategically placed our announcements as close to the edge of worship as possible, after the organ Prelude but before the loftier words are spoken

¹ I am grateful to Scott Black Johnston of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church for his sermon, “God’s Refrigerator Door,” 9/27/09, which both suggested texts and sparked the idea for including the Announcements in this sermon series on Worship.

and sung. We do not even call attention to them, by naming them a “Welcome” in the bulletin.

Heaven forbid we waste precious worship time on:

- the need for Officer Nominations; or
- Singing for Life (an older adult choir that attends to stretching and breathing as well as singing); or
- a Presbyterian Historical Society event, which by the way, is uniquely available to congregations in the Philadelphia area; or
- that the Blessing of Animals service to celebrate our oneness with God’s creation is coming up; or
- our Youth are kicking off an exciting program year today; or
- that our offerings for spiritual enrichment take up two pages in the bulletin; and
- the fact that our local and worldwide outreach has been whittled down to one page simply because of space constraints....

and I ask – with all sincerity – do the announcements really belong in worship?

My guess is that if you came last week and saw that I was beginning a sermon series on Worship – with the opener being the Call to Worship – you imagined that I’d cover Confession and Pardon, Hymns and Praise, Proclamation of the Word, the Offering and Benediction, but you never imagined I would include “The Announcements” in the lineup. Because aren’t these housekeeping matters which break the flow of holy praise and earnest prayer? Should they be given precious time in the sacred hour that must also make room for the forgiveness of sins, the Word of God for the people of God, the offerings of our life and labor to the Lord? ²

Now, we pastors rarely lose our footing midstream in a sermon, or bumble our way through a prayer, but give us a few notes for the Announcements and that’s where the pastoral bloopers get recorded for all time. You know, some folks collect these misspoken moments and mistakes in bulletins, and pass them along to show how silly church announcements sound:

- The sermon this morning: “Jesus Walks on Water.” The sermon tonight: ‘Searching for Jesus.’

² Scott’s observations.

- The Peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been cancelled due to a conflict.
- The youth fundraiser will host a pancake breakfast next Sunday. We ask that everybody who has one to please bring your electric girdle to the church.
- This evening at 7:00 there will be a hymn sing in the park across from the church. Bring a blanket and come prepared to sin.³

And so it goes... the Announcements in Worship are fuel for good laughter, fodder for debate, unnoticed by some, and an irritant to worship purists. But even those who would dispense with them altogether have to admit, upon hearing our scripture readings this morning, that there is a biblical basis for the Announcements: They testify to the church's daily activity of living the gospel. They give life to God's command to Solomon (from our Old Testament reading) that after the Temple is built, what God wants more than a fine place of worship is a people who live the faith with integrity.

The letters of the Apostle Paul contain some of the most theologically rich and rhetorically beautiful writing in the Bible. So when you read the Letter to the Romans which assures us so often at Memorial Services "that neither death, nor life, angels nor rulers, things present nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," you cannot help but wonder how that lofty prose ends with a pedestrian reference to Aquila and Prisca who risked their necks for Paul.

And why in the world did Paul pen the perfect words for weddings, "Love is patient and kind... love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things... Love never ends..." and then follow that up with instructions to the ushers to collect the offering before he comes, so that his own visit won't be interrupted by the offering plates being passed?

But perhaps the most surprising announcement of all comes in Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. Timothy was Paul's heir-apparent, the one to pick up the mantle of leadership to spread the gospel. These letters are personal: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now lives in you." Paul seems almost to be a member of their family. These letters are poignant. Paul admits in the second one that his end is

³ "Church Bulletin Bloopers," bible-reading.com/bulletin & tallrite.com/churchbloopers.

near, as if in hospice care, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith...” So just when we are about to sing, “For All the Saints who from their labors rest...,” Paul punctuates his soaring prose with, “Oh, by the way, fetch my cloak I left with Carpus, and bring my books when you come... and beware of Alexander, the coppersmith who did me great harm.”

You almost wish Paul had not fallen into the trap that so many of us have, when we have hit the “send” icon on an email and then moaned, or left the voice mail message and then said, “Why did I ramble on like that to a phone with no person on the far end of the line ??!” Had Paul known we would be reading his Announcements – “Bring my cloak and books back from Carpus...” I imagine he would have been standing there watching the back of the running courier fading away on the desert horizon saying, “I wish I hadn’t said that...”

Yet we do have them – in holy scripture – these personal footnotes, these postscripts, these Announcements, after the reading of which, we chime in together saying, “The word of the Lord; thanks be to God.” You see these little peculiar footnotes to the history of the early church are supposed to be here. They make room for our Announcements to be sacred too. They give us a biblical basis to know that what happens come Thursday or Saturday, feeding people in need of food, visiting a family with a new baby, taking flowers to the sick, taking up a matter of fairness and justice at work because of what we heard in a church school class, all of that is the church being faithful to our praise:

*O lead me, Lord, that I may lead
the wandering and the wavering feet;
O feed me Lord that I may feed
Thy hungering ones with manna sweet.*

If what happens in this hour of worship does not connect with what we are up to tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that, then, frankly, our worship is in vain; it is empty, devoid of meaning. Preaching professor, Tom Long, has said it this way:

“Properly understood, the announcements are one of those places where the rubber of the church’s theology hits the road. Indeed, it just may be that by moving seamlessly from ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ to ‘the telephone crisis counseling center is in need of additional volunteers,’ by punctuating its soaring praise with the commas of the earthy details of its common life, the church is expressing in its worship one of the most basic convictions about the character of God: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us... Indeed,

the announcements in worship become symbolic of the Christian truth that is the “fleshy” details of life, the working and serving, the community projects and the committee meetings, the being born, the marrying, and the dying, which are the arenas for our encounter with God-become-flesh in Jesus Christ... *these* are the places where the holiness of God is to be found.”⁴

Now, if your heart is all aflutter because you think this sermon means your pet project is about to get pulpit airtime, take a deep breath. Or – if you are sitting there anxiously wondering if our worship is about to change to include a recitation of all the church activities – not to worry. We who are privileged to lead worship in this sacred space try to limit the announcements spoken in worship to congregation-wide events. The rest is written down.

Nevertheless, it is important to be reminded that there is a place in the worship of God, to lift up the mundane, regular stuff of what it means to be the people of God, because everything we do as a congregation is an expression of our life with God, as disciples of Jesus Christ.

You know, we will never know if Paul actually got his books and parchments back, or what transpired between him and Alexander, the coppersmith. But we do know this. The nitty, gritty details of being the church together, the announcements, are not a thing to be missed.

They are indeed our holy, holy, holy script.

AMEN.

⁴ Tom Long, “We Interrupt this Service,” *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, p. 54.