

In Service of Worship©
A homily offered by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz
Sunday, March 26, 2023

Several weeks ago, as I began to work on this order of service, I started asking questions about the music offered by our fabulous guest artists - 29:11. Well, what exactly are you going to sing? The answer I heard was “we’ll figure it out.” Well, title should I put in the order of service? “Just leave it blank – it might be made up in the moment; might change depending on the mood or feeling the room.”

You need to know something about my approach to worship. I rarely leave any moment in the worship service to chance. Sometimes I get a little loose up here and get spontaneous – but most of the time, everything is written down. So when I didn’t know exactly what ya’ll were going to do – or sing – or say – I was pretty nervous. This white girl was raised in a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church where deviating from the standard order of worship was just not done. Not too long after getting kicked out of my confirmation class in the Lutheran Church, I started attending an Evangelical Baptist church with a friend. And, like the story told by Rev. Gretchen Haley, I found myself amidst a small group of charismatic Baptists, who were raising their hands and praising Jesus and....I never did. I liked Jesus – and I eventually came to call myself a Christian - but what they were doing just didn’t feel right to me. I felt, embarrassed and intrigued all at the same time. What exactly were they praising?

But then, I attended seminary and started studying worship -for real. I studied the history of liturgy – from the Latin word – the people’s work. During a first sabbatical, my husband and I toured the country in search of Transformative Worship, our research resulting in the book “Worship that Works.” We experienced all kinds of worship experiences; from a single Muslim who pulled out his prayer rug at a gas station in Denver, to a megachurch in the suburbs of Chicago; to Garage Band Worship in Minneapolis. We asked ourselves deliberately naïve questions, like: Why were these people getting together? What are they worshipping? Why do we call it a worship “service?”

In our research, we came across a book by Dan Kimball, who asked the same question. He wrote this: *“We usually call the weekend time when a church family gets together a “worship service.” Ironically, this term used to mean a time when the saints of God all meet to offer their service to God through worship and their service to others in the church. Over time, however, the title has slowly reversed. The weekend worship “service” has become the time of the week when we go to a church building much like a car goes to an automobile service station.*

Most people view the weekend worship service as a place where we go to get service done to us by “getting our tanks filled up” at the service station. It’s a place where someone will give a sermon and serve us with our weekly sustenance. In automobile terms, you could say it is our weekly fill-up. We come to our service station to have a song leader serve us by leading us in singing songs. All so we can

feel good when we emotionally connect through mass singing and feel secure that we did “worship.”¹

Later in the article, Kimball acknowledges his sarcasm with his service station analogy. Because on the one hand – it’s true. We come to worship for a weekly fill up. We come to pray – to meditate – to sing. We come to hear ancient words in scripture and contemporary poetry, we come to hold one another and the world in prayer. We gather to hear our fellow church members offer their service in music – as worship associates – bell ringers – and more. So, it’s not only about being filled up – it’s about offering our service our lives, our prayers, our praise, our finances and our talents in service to one another in church today.

I think most of us can agree with this dual task of worship. What’s harder to agree on however, is how we do it. Some of us for example, believe that the way to begin a worship service is in silence. Quiet, meditative music plays as people enter – creating a silent space for their hearts and minds to settle. Others, don’t come into the worship service until after the music starts because they want to step into the stream of the service that’s already moving. Likewise, at the end of the service, for the last twenty one years, you were used to sitting through the postlude and not leaving until the last note had been sounded. Then, just a couple of weeks ago, we said “you can leave if you wish. And if there’s something other than piano music, we’ll ask you to sit and listen.”

¹ <http://blogs.covchurch.org/wc/2014/08/the-worship-service/>

As part of my work as your interim minister, I told you I wanted to experiment with your worship service a bit. Why? Remember a couple weeks ago when the opening words included something about comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable? It felt to me like worship had gotten too comfortable – particularly from a white, Protestant, introverted, perspective. Where was the overt expressions of juice and joy? What about those of us who might want to lift up our hands in praise and shout Hallelujah without embarrassment? Could, over the course of several weeks, our worship service contain intellectual stimulation, emotional gravitas, deep silence, spiritual moments of transcendence, embodied joy and yes, moments of sheer yippee? I struggled with how to express all of this until I got an email reflecting on these worship changes from one amongst you. We were talking about the changes to the worship service – moving the announcements and offertory to after the sermon on most Sundays. In a later reflection he wrote,

One way to explore new worship possibilities might be through the lens of worship languages. What would it mean for us to be multilingual with respect to the languages of worship? For example, we might think about the worship language of silence, as well as festivity and joyous exuberance; the worship language of beauty, both musical and visual of bold prophetic proclamation and at times of tender intimacy...”

This is one of the reasons why I love you as a congregation. You care about your worship life and your church and you let your ministers know that. And in this case, this member gave me the metaphor for what we're trying to do here – which is to expand our worship language – so that on any given Sunday we can speak, or sing, or sign or embody – the worship arts, using all of our senses – not just our heads – not just our hearts – but all of them. You may love the silence before the service, but someone else may need a jolt of spiritual rock and roll to engage their body. You may cherish hearing the exact same words spoken in the Embracing Meditation, but your neighbor has tuned out and started checking their phone, because they've heard it hundreds of times over the years. You see – this mutual experience of ours is an act of service to each other – by acknowledging that worship needs differ from person to person. That's why our worship service, though following a standard format – may adapt and shift and change Sunday to Sunday as well as over the years. And when your new minister arrives in August 2024, at a certain point--they will want to adapt and amend the worship service yet again --mindfully and lovingly of course.

Our worship life is a living tradition; it reflects deep historical roots while being open to innovation. There's one big innovation that as your interim minister I haven't even suggested yet. Fortunately, this came from the same church member who suggested we consider ourselves being multi-lingual practitioners of the worship arts. Here's what he wrote:

“A fun interim task for you might be to take the flak for easing the congregation into the late 20th century by figuring out how to place video screens tastefully and acceptably in the sanctuary. About twenty years ago I attended a large, middle-of-the-road Lutheran church in Minneapolis that had them. The sermon was something about antiracism, although they wouldn't have used that word. The minister began his sermon with a 3-minute news clip which set the scene in a way no words ever could. I realized then that if one wanted to bring the world into the hearts and minds of a congregation, there was no substitute for video. It could be especially useful for helping a largely White congregation work towards fulfilling its ends statements.”

Note the phrase “easing the congregation into the late 20th century.”

Unitarian Universalists used to be on the cutting edge of worship, but we have long been surpassed by others who have as rich a liturgical tradition as we do. The use of screens and video in worship is now so commonplace that I forget sometimes that we don't have that here. I've now served four congregations since writing “Worship that Works” and all of them initially freaked out at the thought of putting screens into their worship. And all of them did it. And all of them use them now, tastefully, acceptably, artistically, and powerfully to enhance their worship.

Worship changes – as do we – but there are some things that will never change, because it is embedded in the human spirit – long before we could even articulate what that thing was. It is, as Jacob Trapp said “an inarticulate silence yearning to speak; it is the window of the moment open to the sky of the eternal.” There are many ways and means by which we open that window and experience the sky – yet within each heart and soul there exists the impulse to be lifted up and out of the ordinary – if even for a moment – to feel more deeply those things which we scant notice while on our daily round – and to experience the Holy – in the presence of community- these are the things which shall not change. Whether we are lifted up by a phrase of music, an image in a poem; a video or clip on a screen, or stepping into the infinite pool of silence; these shall be ours – and those who come after us. Creating those opportunities for one another is what it means to be in service to worship. May it be so.