

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on June 20, 2021.

THE INCARNATE NATURE OF WORSHIP

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sister, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Romans 12:1

It was about one year ago, after three months of what seemed like producing worship for television, we re-opened for in-person worship. When we had only a handful of people in the Sanctuary for live-streaming we had quite a bit of freedom in shaping worship. We did not have to be a strict with masks and timing.

When people were allowed into our sanctuary, we had very strict protocols. The experience of worship was very different from what people were used to in the past. People were only allowed to sit in every third pew, masks were to be worn at all times, there was no congregational singing. People came in and sat down and did not move, there was no standing and sitting, taking the offering or greeting others. In order to reduce possible exposure many elements of worship were either eliminated or shortened. We tried to keep the whole experience to 35-40 minutes.

These restrictions stayed in place all through the fall. You then may recall that we had to close for another couple of months before restoring in person worship in late winter. The Covid protocols made worship seem very strange. In many ways our rules restricted the people in the pews to being primarily spectators. They watched while those of us up front “performed.” I was amazed at the discipline and patience of our congregation in living with the constraints on how we worship. Even when the Covid numbers started to move in the right direction, I felt little pressure to change course.

When the number began to improve, it was no surprise to me that first person to complain was a Red Sox fan. About two months ago Steve Dale asked, “Can’t we just stand for things like the *Gloria Patri*.” Steve’s comment reminds us of how important a role that movement of the body plays in our worship. This morning we continue our summer focus on worship. The purpose of this series is to seek to learn from our Covid experiences. We can use our experiences to reform our liturgy in meaningful ways. I invite your feedback all through the summer. In August the Worship Committee will meet in order to reform our liturgy for the Fall.

Today we will focus on the issue raised by Steve. What role does the body play in our approach to God. In our text for this morning Paul tells us **I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sister, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.** In these words, Paul is reminding us of what I could call the incarnate nature of worship.

All too often, Christians can talk as if the spirit and the body are disconnected. We sometimes assume that the spiritual life is all about the contact of our spirits with the divine. We can think that the body does not have any role in the spiritual life. This is to deny the great connection between the body and soul.

Yet we know in real life that our bodies affect our souls and our souls impact our bodies. A person whose spouse has died often experiences illness the following year. We know that when people suffer a loss it can have a profound impact on physical health. In a journal article from a couple of years ago we read these words:

Amy Davis, a 32-year-old from Bristol, TN, became sick with grief after losing Molly, a close 38-year-old family member, to cancer. "Early grief was intensely physical for me," Davis says. "After the shock and adrenaline of the first weeks wore off, I went through a couple of months of extreme fatigue, with nausea, headaches, food aversion, mixed-up sleep cycles, dizziness, and sun sensitivity. It was extremely difficult to do *anything*. ... If there's one thing I want people to know about grief, it's how awful it can make your body feel."

While hurts to our souls can have physical ramifications the opposite can also be true. When our bodies feel sick or run down this can hurt our spirits. Depression can often have a source in our bodies. We often need healing to our bodies and souls.

The point I am making here is that we are not compartmentalized people. We are both bodies and souls and we are to worship God with our whole beings. Steve was right, when the congregation was forced to sit and never move that was not fully worship.

When we read the Bible and Christian history it is amazing how much the movement of the body is involved in the spiritual life. In the book of Samuel, we read of King David bringing the arc of the covenant into Jerusalem. I love the picture of this event. In this procession there is music and singing and there before the arc is David dancing before the Lord. This ancient liturgical dance must have been pretty wild, because David's wife looks out the window and sees David dancing and she is appalled, embarrassed and angry at her husband. David is so excited to bring the arc, which contains the Ten Commandments, that he worships God through dance.

Another example of worship in the Old Testament that involved movement was the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There were three times every year that Jews were expected to come to the temple for festivals. They would come for Passover, Pentecost and Sukkot. There are a whole series of Psalms that are called Psalms of Ascent. These Psalms would be chanted as people made their way up to Jerusalem. The movement of the body was part of the worship as they made their way singing **I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."**

This practice was not lost to Christians. Pilgrimage became a very important Christian practice. There were many destinations for pilgrims. The earliest was Jerusalem. Men and women would make their way to those important sites in Israel connected with the life of Jesus. The most famous in Europe was the burial site of the Apostle James in Northwest Spain. The Camino is composed of many ancient pilgrimage routes that all lead to the Cathedral in Galatia.

The most famous pilgrimage route in the English-speaking world ends at Canterbury Cathedral. If you recall Archbishop Beckett was assassinated in Canterbury Cathedral by agents of Henry II on December 29, 1170. Soon after people started coming to venerate his burial spot. This became such a popular pilgrimage destination that it inspired Chaucer to write his ***Canterbury Tales*** in 1392.

During my Clergy renewal time, Kathleen and I walked a pilgrimage trail. We began our journey at the ruins of Melrose Abby in Scotland and walked some sixty miles to what is called the Holy Island of Lindisfarne. Lindisfarne was a Celtic Abby that helped spread Christianity across the North of England. It was also the first Monastery attacked by the Vikings in 793 AD which sent shock waves through Europe. We found this one of the most meaningful experiences of our lives. It was not the destination that was so meaningful, it was the journey. It was the movement of our bodies that helped open us to learn from each other and experience God more fully.

The movement of our bodies helps connect us with God. There are all kinds of bodily actions that Christians have used to pray. Some early Christians stood and held out their arms with palms facing up. This helped them focus on being open to God's presence and receiving divine love and grace.

Many Christian traditions encourage people to kneel when they pray. People kneel beside their beds at night or on kneelers in the Sanctuary. This indicates a quality of supplication before the divine. I have never experienced it in any Presbyterian worship services, but in our Presbyterian Directories for worship there are directions that say people may kneel.

Many Christian traditions encourage people to cross themselves as entry and exit into prayer. But different traditions follow very different ways of crossing themselves. Most Western Christian churches touch the forehead then the chest, then the left shoulder and finally the right. Eastern Christians follow a different pattern. First, they put their right fingers in two formations. The thumb and two forefingers together to remind them of the Trinity. The other two fingers are folded together to remind us of the divine and human nature of Jesus. Then the hand goes from the forehead to the chest, to the right shoulder and to the left.

There are other acts of worship that involve movement of the body. Choirs process and recess. Bibles are carried in and candles are lit. The two sacraments of the church include the physicality of the world. We use water to baptize a human into the Christian Community. We eat bread and drink from the cup as we receive God's grace and presence in Communion. A sacrament is an outward sign of an invisible grace. The actions of our bodies are connected in a deep way with our spirits.

Several years ago, we decided to try something new for the Sunday when we remember Jesus' baptism. We set up three stations in the chancel that represented different meanings of baptism. We had the baptismal font and fountains. Following the sermon, the congregation was invited to come forward to renew their baptismal vows at each of these stations. My memory is that I was not able to sleep very much the week before this first service. I had never been in a Presbyterian Church worship service where people were asked to get up out of their pew to do anything.

I was worried that after my invitation to come forward and the music started to play that nothing would happen. The nightmare scenario played out in my head that everyone would stay glued to their pews and looking at each other thinking Greg must be crazy.

On the first Sunday I was astonished that nearly every person in the Sanctuary came forward and visited at least one of the stations. The feedback I received in the following month

was overwhelmingly positive. People found the experience deeply moving. I believe that it was the movement of coming forward that gave power to the moment. Saying some words while seated in a pew is not as meaningful as walking forward and touching or drinking water.

There are a lot of possible ways that our bodies participate in worship. But Christians do not all follow the same patterns. Every denomination and every tradition and even various congregations have their own choreography of worship. One of the difficulties in visiting a new congregation is that you do not know how to move.

When I was in college my aunt passed away at an early age. The whole family went to the Catholic Church in Ridgefield Connecticut. We are largely a Protestant family. I think the only Roman Catholic present that day was in the casket. I felt so sorry for the Priest who conducted the service. He clearly started to become frustrated with the congregation because we just did not know how and when to move. After a while he started to give stage directions in a perturbed voice. You can stand now, please sit now. You can kneel. It taught me that every congregation has its own choreography of worship.

So why have I been talking so much about the body in worship. As one writer tells us: **"The whole person, with all his senses, with both mind and body, needs to be involved in genuine worship."** When we participate in worship the movement of our bodies helps us be open to the presence of God.

As I have said before, this summer we will focus on various aspects of our liturgy to explore ways to make our experience of worship more meaningful. One part of our thinking should be on movement. What changes might we make to deepen our experience of God? I ask you in the coming weeks to reflect on what movements in worship are meaningful to you.

So, we will ponder questions such as:

During which parts of worship should we stand?

What is the most meaningful way to take Communion – coming forward to receive the element or having them brought to the pew?

How do we receive the offering?

Should we develop more worship experiences like the baptism renewal that involves a physical response?

When we pray for the people of God should we hold hands or stand?

As you can tell this sermon raises more questions than giving answers. Our Covid experience has reminded us of the importance the body plays in worship. Movement gives depth and meaning to our experience of God. It is our task this summer to reshape our liturgical choreography to fit the context of our congregation in this time and place in order for us to live out Paul's instructions – **I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sister, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.**