

Sermon (Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20, 8/7/16):

As I've probably mentioned to you before, I went to a Catholic University in Western New York where I received my Bachelor's degree. While there, I became very involved in the Campus Ministry which led to many great things, including my connecting with a few of the Priests who worked there. Among them were two priests who took turns leading mass on weekends at a small Byzantine Catholic church in town. Periodically I joined them and I was absolutely fascinated by the way they worshipped there. It was surely nothing like what I had grown up with in the Reformed Church! It was even vastly different from the periodic Catholic Masses I had been to. It was similar to the kind of worship one would experience in an Orthodox church. There were icons that people kissed, incense and chanting and ornate robes and lots of parading down the aisles.

One of the things that fascinated me the most was the place where the bread and wine were consecrated. It took place behind an ornate wall, out of sight of the parishioners. The communion table they used was a glass enclosed model of something that looked like a church.

I have to say that this new experience greatly intrigued me. I loved the pageantry, the mystery, and the sense of holiness that filled the room much like the smoke from the incense. It made me feel as if I were being lifted up into God's throne room as depicted in the call of Isaiah.

During one of the trips with my Priest friend, the altar boy who usually assisted failed to show. So in a moment of desperation, and you know they had to be desperate, they asked me to fill in. I kind of laughed, thinking they had to be joking. They weren't. My laughter then turned to mild panic as I asked them if they remembered what my religious background was. I felt totally out of place and unequipped for such a role. I was convinced I would only make a fool out of myself and them. Perhaps the congregation would even catch on that I was a total fake and chase me and the Priest out the door! The priest insisted, though, assuring me I would be fine if I just followed his lead and made it look convincing that I knew exactly what I was doing. Well, somehow I fumbled my way through the service including witnessing all that mysterious stuff that went

on behind the wall and on top of that glass communion table. I have to tell you I absolutely loved it!

It is interesting to consider the great diversity that is found in the way we Christians worship, isn't it? Sometimes it might even cause one to wonder if we are worshipping the same God! The differences are many including the spaces we gather in, the liturgies we use, the prayers we say, the words we recite from memory, the tools we use, the hymns we sing, the music that is played or not played, and our understanding of what a sacrament is. We stand, we sit, we kneel, we fill the room with fragrances, we use icons, pulpits, tables, anointing oil, long sermons, short sermons, no sermons...whew there just seems to be no end to the differences.

Interestingly enough, I have read that one of the places where attendance is increasing these days is in the Orthodox Church with its high liturgical rituals much like what I experienced at that Byzantine church. Perhaps, there is a deepening thirst these days for the mysterious reverential awe that these types of services offer.

Sometimes the vast variety found in the way we Christians worship, makes you wonder who's got it right. Which form of worship pleases God the most? Which one has an accurate understanding of what a sacrament is? Which one does the most good in the way it shapes us and helps us to find communion with the Holy?

The first words out of the mouth, or at least written down, by the prophet Isaiah are sharp, strong, and even offensive. Certainly, it's not the kind of sermon I would ever think of preaching when first showing up on the scene as a church's new Pastor. Alas, poor Isaiah did not have the benefit of the kind Seminary training I had. Thank goodness you have me and not Isaiah right?

So, after making that disclaimer, I must emphasize that these are Isaiah's words and this is what the lectionary gave me to work with for this Sunday. I know, what were they thinking?

'Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged.'

Now, I don't know whether you noticed, but it seems like God is a tad displeased with this congregation, particularly with its worship.

Now, admittedly, I have been to worship services that have made me a little nauseated. There have been times when I thought that if I had to sing another round of a praise song I would spit. Have you ever heard what the difference is between a praise song and a machine gun? A machine gun only has a hundred rounds.

It's just not my thing but to each their own, as they say. God, however, seems to not be so tolerant.

According to Isaiah, God's words couldn't be more direct and clear. 'You're offerings to me are futile. You're incense is an abomination to me.' (Darn, I really liked that incense part too.) 'Your Sabbath and convocations I can no longer endure. Your appointed holy days and festivals I hate. All of it has become a burden to me. I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes.'

Okay, God, why don't you tell us what you really think. Seriously, it's clear that God is greatly displeased with the worship going on in this most Holy of Places, the Temple, where people would bring their offerings to be sacrificed and where communion with the Holy was meant to feel most palpable. This was the one place where people thought they were at least doing something right. But then this! What a blow! What a way to knock a Pastor down! What a way to melt the hearts of a church full of parishioners!

It would be the equivalent of God announcing to us one Sunday morning how much he hates our worship services. He despises the very thought of having to get up early on Sunday morning to come to this place. He's sick of the hymns we sing. The prayers we pray are not worth the time it takes to say them. The sermon is laughable and not in a good way. What we put in the offering plate gives him a stomach ache. The bread and juice we share during communion leaves a bad taste in his mouth. "Can't you even buy some decent grape juice?!" God asks. The worship space you gather in is a monstrosity. There is nothing, absolutely nothing here that gives me even the least bit of pleasure.

Whoa. How deflating is that? Sounds a little like the nightmares I

would have before my preaching class in Seminary when it was my turn to be critiqued by the whole class on the worship service I led.

Some have suggested over the years that these words were an attack on the style of worship used back then...namely the whole sacrificial system that took place at the Temple.

If one carefully reads on, however, I think it becomes clear that this attack really had little to do with the style of worship and everything to do with the hearts of those who came to worship.

‘Even though you make many prayers,’ God says, ‘your hands are full of blood.’

In some significant way the people who came to worship were suffering from a severe disconnect between how they lived outside the Temple and how they worshiped inside the Temple. In other words, one can’t say ‘I love you God’ in the Temple and then live a life contrary to the calling of God as soon as one puts the car in gear and drives out of the Temple parking lot. Such a double standard only mocks the worship we gather to participate in.

As a Pastor, I often hear lots of apologies for the kinds of profanity someone might use in a setting outside of the church. When it dawns on them whose company they are keeping, they will look to me and say, ‘Oh, I’m sorry Father’ or ‘I’m sorry Reverend’. Of course, you know how delicate Clergy ears are. In truth, I have to confess, that kind of stuff gets a little old after a while.

None the less, it does suggest just how aware we often are of how our lives outside the church do not match what we do and say inside the church. Today’s passage reminds us that what we do out there matters as much as what we do in here.

Equally so, I get a little weary of hearing, “I don’t go to church because it’s filled with hypocrites.” In my braver moments, I’ll respond by saying, ‘Of course it’s filled with hypocrites! People in church are just as human as anyone else and we make mistakes, we have bad days, we mess up, we might even, horrors of horrors, use language that is unbecoming but at least we’re making some attempt at getting it right.’

You see I don’t think this passage is a call to be perfect...none of us

can be that. No, as God said in this passage - 'let us argue it out.' In my mind that means let us struggle together to get it right, let us wrestle with this magnificent calling we've been given so that we can better understand what it means to live and love this gift of faith inside and outside of the church. Let us do all we can to make our worship the best we are able to make it by showing God we really mean what we say, even when we're tempted to think that God isn't looking.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.