

Religion And Playing Church?—Bob Munshaw

Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

And there they were ... the pastors of the Wabash Conference. It's 20 plus years ago now, and I was a part of that group of 60 or more pastors coming together for the annual meetings. Reports were given, sermons were preached, songs were sung, but last of all—and it was always the last act of conference—the appointments for the next year were read. In the old days of the church, the appointments were always a surprise. At the reading of the appointments, the pastors and their families would sit and wait for their name to be called and their appointment read.

Sometimes the surprises were good, sometimes they were great. But, sometimes, they were a little or even a lot scary. But that was the old days. By the time I had arrived in Wabash, the pastors and their families had been told in advance, and sometimes even consulted, about where they were going. And sometimes the responses of the pastors to the news was a little like the responses of the disciples in Mark 10.

“Superintendent Colgan, when you come into power in the Kingdom of Wabash conference, remember me. Might I sit at the right hand of power by pastoring the Bedford Indiana Church, or the left hand of power by pastoring at one of the strong and influential Indianapolis churches?”

“Superintendent Colgan, why are you punishing me and wasting all of my incredible preaching and leadership abilities by sending me to Podunk Pawnee?”

“Superintendent Colgan, I have faithfully served for 20 or 30 or 40 years in the conference. How can you punish me by sending me to this or that church with such difficult challenges or in some forsaken, backwoods place like Decatur? There is nothing out there but deer and no people but the Amish. And do they not already have their own church?”

This is a little hyperbolic, but there is truth in this story. And Superintendent Colgan no doubt had to remind several and perhaps many pastors over the years that if they truly wanted to become great from the perspective of the Kingdom of God, they must learn to serve where they were sent and not seek status or greatness in the eyes of the other pastors.

The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. Whoever wishes to be first ... must be slave of all. If His followers are to become great, according to Jesus, they must serve. Okay ... but these words of Jesus were not spoken to pastors at some conference, they were written to Jesus' followers. And if we claim to be Christians, are we not to be followers of Jesus?

I have asked myself at times what it would look like if we could just be Christians and be a church like they had in the New Testament ... you know ... real Christians who are just following Jesus, serving each other and the world around us. When I was pastoring full-time, I spent a lot of time thinking about this, and actually, this is a very common thing among North American Christians. It is a product of something historians have called the Restorationist Movement. The general idea is this: we restore the church to what it was meant to be. We rid ourselves of all of the traditions that have sullied and cluttered the church over 2000 years, and we become churches in the image of Acts 2 and Acts 4.

Think about it. Why do we do what we do? Every Sunday we get up and we go to church. We gather with a bunch of people for an hour, or maybe even two. Some of those people are our friends. Some are acquaintances. Some we hardly know at all. We go and we sit in our spots. We sing certain songs. Some of the songs were written 30 years ago. Some were written 500 years ago. Maybe we sing a favorite or a couple favorites that we have known since we were kids. More often, I get complainy because I don't know some of the songs very well, and they are mostly not my songs, and I feel a little foul because I like my churchy songs.

We read four different passages of Scripture. Some other Free Methodist churches do this as well, but not very many. Someone of our many exhorters, or preaching people, comes and preaches, which is very different. Normally churches have one pastor, and people in those churches largely hear one person's theological perspective week in and week out. At St. Paul's we are challenged by some different perspectives, and I think that while this can be stretching, it is also really healthy and helps us stretch and think outside our tiny boxes. While it is strange and very St. Paulsy that we have such a variety of people who take a turn in the pulpit, the early Methodist Church in America had very few ordained clergy, so it was common to have lay people preach. Most of them were pretty uneducated, too, and just spoke from the heart, usually with no notes at all.

We follow up the preaching with the Apostles' Creed. Not all churches recite the Creed, and of those who do, some do it far less often. We recite it weekly. The Apostles' Creed predates the Nicene Creed of 325. The creeds most often took shape in times of controversy, and their purpose was to provide a doctrinal statement of correct belief or orthodoxy as a response to those controversies. Clearly the creeds do not say everything that they could say, and one legitimate critique I have heard is that they say nothing at all about the life, ministry or teachings of Jesus. In a sense, reciting the Creed is a little like singing the national anthem, which was also written in a time of controversy, you remember. (It was that little war that you fought against the Brits and us Canadians.) Both the creed and the anthem can be something we do and/or ignore and not even think about ... well, until someone kneels. When we recite the Creed, we are symbolically linking ourselves with the communion of saints, both living and dead. We are reminding ourselves that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. Should we recite the Creed every week? I'm not sure. I do know that the things that we do as habits shape us, but it is also easy to recite the Creed or read the Communion liturgy in auto-pilot.

We follow up the creed with prayer. A part of our liturgy at St. Paul's is that we always, always pray for people suffering from cancer. Even when Kathy is not with us, often someone will make the effort to step up and pray for those with cancer. But we do not pray for those with heart disease or many other deadly diseases we could name. We do pray for others though. Usually our prayers are prayers of petition for family or friends or community members who are hurting or in need. Sometimes they are prayers of thanksgiving. Rarely are the prayers we raise prayers of confession, but then, we do corporately confess in the Communion liturgy. Early Methodists, meeting in smaller class groups, asked each other probing questions. We do not really offer a place for that.

We follow up prayer with the Passing of the Peace which can be painful and awkward for introverts and visitors, but which I think is healthy in reminding us that we are called to right

relationships with each other. It is tough to pass the peace with someone you are holding a grudge against.

We celebrate Communion every week. This is very Wesleyan, in that Wesley encouraged Methodists to partake of Communion as often as it is offered. It is rare for Free Methodists to offer Communion weekly, and as with the recitation of the Creed, the liturgy from the red hymn book can become something we just do thoughtlessly before we sing our final songs and head off to potluck or lunch with friends or family. As individuals, we need to remember to engage in the liturgy. As celebrants, we need to remind the community from time to time to think and engage deeply.

Then we leave church and go on to the rest of our lives. If we were even listening to the sermon, by Monday we have often forgotten the message and the implications of that message. And that, too often, is where church ends. For most of us, the bell will ring again in seven days at 11:00 and we will do it again. We have done our Christian thing and gone to church.

I know I have been reflecting out loud about things that you are fully aware that we do, because most of you here do them every week, too. But I think we lose track of the fact that these strange things that we do are not ends in themselves. They are to be a means to an end

These strange things we do somehow are to call us to recognize the mystery of Emmanuel, God with us. Why do we gather each week if not first and foremost to worship a God who is living and active and among us? We can get pretty good at doing church “right,” whatever that might mean, but where in life and in the church are we encountering God?

Boy, Job and his “buddies” got a taste of Emmanuel in Job 38. Job and all of his “friends” had spilled out their ignorance. They thought that they knew so much about God and God’s ways ... and God, who had been absent from the conversation for 35 chapters, shows up and calls them on it. “Gird up your loins, folks. I’m going to question you. What do you really know about the mysteries of the world? You know nothing about it!”

God answers Job and his accusers out of a whirlwind, which is often used to indicate God’s presence in the Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible. “It speaks to us of the powerful, unimaginable nature of God; that God is like a tornado that cannot be opposed or controlled” (enduring word.com).

Like Job and his friends, we may know very little about all of the mysteries of life and of God’s ways. We like our religion to be safe and controllable. We go to church week after week, and that discipline in itself, I think, can shape us. But there is more here. The disciples were with Jesus every day for at least parts of three years ... and here in our gospel text we find them defining for us how to miss the point.

Mark regularly has Jesus getting frustrated with the disciples. He tells them things, and they don’t get it. In Mark 8:21, he asks them, *Do you not yet understand?* Mark 8:28 records Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Messiah.

Commentator William Lane notes that a regular theme in Mark's gospel following Peter's confession was a repeated effort by Jesus to hammer home in his disciples "the spirit of self-renunciation demanded by the cross." You remember that just a couple weeks ago, the disciples were arguing along the road about which of them is the greatest, and Jesus said, "The first shall be last. Be a servant of everyone else (Mark 9), and don't push away the little kids because you think that they are annoying and not important."

Jesus is constantly communicating to them that the life of a follower of Jesus is one of sacrifice. Mark 8: "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you lose your life for the sake of the Good News, you will find it. What is the benefit if you gain the whole world and lose your soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?"

In Mark 9, you also have Jesus' transfiguration, and Peter, James and John are there ... In some mysterious way they got to see Jesus transformed, his clothes becoming dazzlingly white and Moses and Elijah there talking to him. Jesus talked to them about rising from the dead, and they heard a voice from the cloud saying, "This is my dearly loved son. Listen to him."

Our text has a prelude that the lectionary-o-graphers have not included, and I think it gives us important context for our gospel reading. We have had a constant stream of the disciples' missing the point. Now, hear this from Mark 10:32ff: *They were now on the way up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. The disciples were filled with awe, and the people following behind were overwhelmed with fear. Taking the twelve disciples aside, Jesus once more began to describe everything that was about to happen to him. "Listen," he said, "we're going up to Jerusalem, where the Son of Man will be betrayed to the leading priests and the teachers of religious law. They will sentence him to die and hand him over to the Romans. They will mock him, spit on him, flog him with a whip, and kill him, but after three days he will rise again.* (NLT)

Is this not pretty clear? I am not trying to belittle the disciples here, because I believe that what we are seeing here is very much human nature. Too often, we hear what we want to hear, and we see what we want to see, and we often stick our heads in the sand when the truth does not fit the narrative we want. This is true of James and John, and also often true of us. It is clear that the Messiah that James and John are looking for is the Messiah who will make Israel great again!! In their minds, Jesus is about to become the king of a restored Kingdom of Israel, and they want a special place in that kingdom. They have totally missed the point.

But how often do we miss the point, as well? Do we not want America to be great? ... and do we not want a secure place in a strong America? ... and where does the Kingdom of God and the nation of America overlap? ... and where do they not overlap at all?

If we could go back in time 250 years to colonial America and attend a Methodist church, we would find the experience vastly different from what we experience today. I thought long about reenacting the first lines of a sermon from that time and wait for a minute in silence just to see how and if you would react. But I thought it would just be incredibly awkward. At a 1776 service in Virginia, George Shadforth stepped to the pulpit and cried out, "Who wants a savior? The first

that believes will be justified.” Biographer John Wigger described what happened next. He writes, “The place erupted!! ... In a few minutes the house was ringing with the cries of broken-hearted sinners, and the shouts of happy believers.”

What do we expect as we come to worship? Early American ministers Francis Asbury and Thomas Rankin debated each other over the noise and enthusiasm that was a part of the Methodists in the southern US, but whenever the seeming excesses were publicly opposed or were stamped out, the work of conviction and conversion usually abated as well.

It was a different place and a different time. I am not saying that hooting and hollering are a right or wrong way to do church. We have two different Free Methodist churches here in Greenville, and what takes place in the three church services between the two different churches is not the same. The songs are different. We are very liturgical in an Anglican sort of way. They are not. One is not necessarily better or worse, but they are different.

If we could simultaneously watch all of the services in Greenville at the same time, we would see a variety of similarities and differences taking place.

My brother-in-law’s Brethren church practices footwashing on a regular basis. Footwashing kind of gives me the willies.

If somehow we could get a broad sampling of the meetings of churches from around the world, we would see even greater variety: churches in Africa that meet for 3 or 4 hours, Orthodox services with icons and perfumed incense, independent churches in mid-America with hellfire and brimstone sermons. There are some similarities and there are also vast differences in what takes place during times of corporate worship every Sunday morning.

There is not one style that is right or wrong ... only preferences and traditions. But whatever strange and even mysterious things we do as we gather ... and as we go our separate ways throughout the week, we must see these things we have done today as means to an end, not as ends in themselves. At some point, we are invited to read ourselves into the story and to recognize and celebrate what God is doing in the world, and what God wants to do in our community and in our lives. As we open our eyes to the mystery of God who is among us, it is then that we can join with the Psalmist and from our hearts truly worship—*O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. ... Praise the Lord.*