

Worship Series 4
 “Confession, Pardon & Feast”
 Delivered Sunday, October 2, 2011 – World Communion Sunday
 By Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet
 Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, Sc

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Nearly fifty years ago, a change occurred in the global Christian community regarding worship. In 1963, the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church produced a new *Constitution on Sacred Liturgy*. It called for sweeping reforms in the Catholic mass – the most controversial was for Roman Catholic churches to change from the Latin liturgy to worship in the native languages of people. It also promoted a more joyful celebration of the sacraments, a renewed emphasis on the centrality of scripture, and more congregational participation in worship. Some Protestants watched these changes from the sidelines, and thought: Well... 500 years after the Reformation, it's about time the Catholics caught up. More discerning Protestants realized that the worship renewal of Vatican 2 for Catholicism could inspire other faith communities to enliven our worship as well. Ancient practices our Protestant forebears had once dismissed as “Catholic” – such as vestments for clergy including the use of colorful stoles; a greater emphasis on the sacraments, corporate liturgy – both spoken and sung – also swept into Protestant worship. (1)

What resulted was not only renewal of worship, but also a global, ecumenical movement of claiming our Oneness in Christ across denominational lines. The Catholic Church became a bit more like the Protestants in practice, and Protestants reclaimed ancient traditions and ventured into new creative forms of worship. In the years that followed the Second Vatican Council, just about every mainline denomination produced new Books of Common Worship, and if you are fifty or older, you know that worship today isn't exactly the way it was when you were younger. In the church of my upbringing, the minister never wore a colorful stole; other than Christmas and Easter there was no reference to a “liturgical year;” we celebrated communion only four times a year, and the sum total of Sunday services was basically three hymns, the confession and pardon, a long prayer, a longer sermon, the offering and the Apostle's Creed.

Well, renewal and creativity also brought debate: traditional versus contemporary, the organ versus praise bands, old liturgical furniture of pulpit, font and table versus a screen that drops from the ceiling for new hymns and visuals. What belongs in worship and what doesn't, what serves the purposes of evangelism attracting newcomers to the faith, what preserves the best of our tradition, what new forms – of music, drama and dance – can enliven the praise of God and our experience of worship.

In this season of discernment, one of things that seemed to go up for grabs was the Prayer of Confession. Many churches did away with the Confession – said it was “a downer,” too depressing to think about the negative stuff, likely to scare folks away rather than attract them. But churches like this one, confident that God is sovereign in all of life, certain that by our very nature - human beings are sinful creatures, in need of God's grace, mercy and forgiveness – we have insisted that Confession and Pardon are essential in the regular rhythm of worship.

The Confession of sin has its ethical dimension to be sure, but it really is less about what we do or do not do than about affirming our relationship with the Living God. A lot of

people dismiss religion altogether as a list of “Thou Shall Nots.” If you go to church, then... you don’t do this and you don’t do that.... This way of thinking supposes religion is a boundary-setting endeavor that draws all kinds of lines that are not to be crossed. But the truth of the matter is that ours is a faith that is rooted in a most radical notion of freedom! God has set us free – to have and enjoy an abundant life, and to share that abundance with others. Our ethical behavior – of following this commandment or that one – is in response to the good order of God’s creation.

While the repeated refrain of the Ten Commandments is: “Thou shall not...” that is neither where they begin, nor where they end. They begin with the reminder of what God has done for the people. “I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of slavery.” They end with “Do not be afraid.” And in the very middle is the key interpretive word: “Remember.” When we confess our sins before God and one another, what we are doing above all else is remembering our relationship – with God and with the human family, God’s own children. The Prayer of Confession is not so much a downer, as it is an affirmation that we are dependent on God’s grace, in the context of God’s love, and we acknowledge God’s power to transform all of human life.

Rather than emphasizing the “Thou shall not...” the commandments make more theological sense heard this way: Because you have been released from slavery in Egypt, from worshipping the gods of Pharaoh, *you are free* to worship the one true God who loves you with grace, mercy and forgiveness. Because you are no longer required to spend your lives in backbreaking labor for Pharaoh, *you are free* to take one day a week not to work, the Sabbath – a day to rest, worship and delight in God’s goodness. Because you have been saved by the God of all creation, *you are free* to show kindness, respect and gentleness to one another, to care for the elderly, stay faithful in marriage, to tell the truth to each other, and to respect one another’s property. (2)

God knows we fall short of these commandments, as well as Jesus’ command to love as we have been loved, but every time we confess our sins, and receive God’s pardon, it is as if the waters of the Red Sea – that passage between slavery and freedom – part again, and allow us to go forward anew – free, forgiven, and into a bright and hopeful future toward a land of plenty and of promise.

The earliest records of the church celebrating communion come from Rome around the year 200. Way back then, they began the communion just as we do: “The Lord Be with you” “and also with you...” They prayed a Prayer of Thanksgiving that sounded much like ours – a rehearsal of the history of salvation. The person presiding took bread and broke it like we do. They shared the cup like we do. But then there was something different – something quite remarkable - that somewhere along the way fell out of common worship practice. There was another vessel on the table – a bowl full of milk mixed with honey. They ate the bread and drank from the cup, and then they had a sip of milk and honey. (3) In so doing, they remembered the earliest promise God gave to Moses back when the people were still enslaved in Egypt: “I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land – to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey.” At the table, worshippers remembered who they were in relationship to the God of salvation, and they were given a foretaste of the future – milk and honey - a promise that all will be well. Confession.... Pardon.... This feast.... It is our journey from that which enslaves us to freedom.

Confession.... Pardon.... This feast.... remind us who God is, and who we are, and that age old promise that should never escape our worship – come what may - all will be well. All will be well. Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

NOTES

(1) Tom Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars*, p. 3-4.

(2) Lisa Kenkeremath, “Charter of Freedom,” *Lectionary Homiletics*, Oct.-Nov., 2011, p. 9

(3) Patrick Willson, “Feast of Remembrance,” *Lectionary Homiletics*, Oct.-Nov., 2011, p. 8.