

Worship Series 3
 “The Announcements”
 Delivered Sunday, September 25, 2011
 By Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor
 Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

Rom. 16:1-4; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Timothy 4:9-14;
 1 Thessalonians 5:26-28

From Paul’s letters to the early church, listen for the word of God:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, who work with me in Christ Jesus, and who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds.

Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss. I solemnly command you by the Lord that this letter be read to all of them. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. The word of the Lord/Thanks be to God. (1)

In their faithful attention to the details, I imagine just about every church Worship Committee – at one point or another – debates the Announcements and where they should come in the Order of Service. Sometimes they are lumped together with the pastoral concerns and celebrations, just before the Prayers of the People. That way the service is only interrupted once with particular specifics of the day. In some churches they are shared as the young children leave the sanctuary – since that is a natural pause in the service anyway. No one ever complains if the Announcements are too brief, but if the service goes 5 minutes past the hour, the length of the announcements is a likely suspect. Some churches don’t make Announcements at all and just assume folks will read the bulletin. We have strategically placed Shandon’s Announcements as close to the edge of worship as possible, after the Prelude but before the loftier words are spoken and sung. It seems to make sense to welcome visitors early in the service, but we also realize that any late comer misses them altogether.

Do the Announcements really belong in worship? Or are they unnecessary interruptions which break the flow of holy praise and earnest prayer? Should they be given precious time in the sacred hour that must also make room for the forgiveness of sins, the word of God for the people of God, the offerings of our life and labor to the Lord? (2)

We pastors rarely lose our footing midstream in a sermon, or bumble our way through a prayer, but give us a few notes for the Announcements and that's where the pastoral bloopers get recorded for all time. You know – some folks collect these misspoken moments and mistakes in bulletins, and pass them along to show how silly church announcements sound: *The sermon this morning: "Jesus Walks on Water." The sermon tonight: "Searching for Jesus." The Peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been cancelled due to a conflict. The youth fundraiser will host a pancake breakfast next Sunday. We ask that everybody who has one to please bring your electric girdle to the church. This evening at 7:00 there will be a hymn sing in the park across from the church. Bring a blanket and come prepared to sin.* (3)

And so it goes... the Announcements in Worship are fuel for good laughter, fodder for debate, unnoticed by some, and an irritant to worship purists. But even those who would dispense with them altogether have to admit – upon hearing our scripture readings this morning – that there is a biblical basis for the Announcements. The daily activity of living the gospel – by supporting the youth mission trip, enjoying Christian community at an outdoor Carnival, celebrating college students in our midst with gratitude for this church's generous support of campus ministry, – all of these things – belong in worship because they are part of our worship.

The letters of the Apostle Paul contain some of the most theologically rich and rhetorically beautiful writing in the bible. So when you read the Letter to the Romans which assures us so often at Memorial Services "that neither death, nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," you cannot help but wonder how that lofty prose ends with a pedestrian reference to Aquila and Prisca who risked their necks for Paul. And why in the world did Paul pen the perfect words for weddings, "Love is patient and kind... love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things... Love never ends..." and then follow that up with instructions to the ushers about collecting the offering before he comes, so that his own visit won't be interrupted by the offering plates being passed?

But perhaps the most surprising announcement of all comes in Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. Timothy was Paul's heir-apparent, the one to pick up the mantel to spread the gospel. These letters are personal: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now lives in you." Paul seems almost to be a member of their family. These letters are poignant. Paul admits in the second one that his end is near, as if in hospice care, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith..." So just when we are about to sing, "For All the Saints who from their labors rest..." Paul punctuates his soaring prose with, "Oh, by the way, fetch my cloak I left with Carpus, and bring my books when you come... and beware of Alexander, the coppersmith who did me great harm." You almost wish Paul had not fallen into the trap that so many of us have – when we have hit the "send" button and then moaned; or left the voice mail message and then said, "Why did I ramble on like that to a machine??!!" Had Paul known we would be reading his Announcements – "Bring my cloak and books back from Carpus..." I imagine he would have been standing there watching the back of the running courier fading on the desert horizon saying, "I wish I hadn't said that..." Yet we do have them – in Holy Scripture – these personal footnotes, these postscripts, these... Announcements... after the reading of which – we chime in together saying, "The word of the Lord; thanks be to God."

Well, these little peculiar footnotes to the history of the early church are supposed to be here. They make room for our Announcements to be sacred too. They give us all a biblical basis to know that what happens come Thursday – feeding the homeless, visiting a family

3

with a new baby, cooking for the Presbyterian Student Association so our college students have a taste of home – all of that is the church, in bold accord, singing “*Come celebrate the journey now and praise the Lord.*” If what happens in this hour of worship does not connect with what you are up to tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that, then – frankly – our worship is in vain – it is empty, devoid of meaning. Preaching professor, Tom Long, has said it this way: “Properly understood, the announcements are one of those places where the rubber of the church’s theology hits the road. Indeed, it just may be that by moving seamlessly from ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ to ‘the telephone crisis counseling center is in need of additional volunteers,’ by punctuating its soaring praise with the commas of the earthy details of its common life, the church is expressing in its worship one of the most basic convictions about the character of God: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us... Indeed, the announcements in worship become symbolic of the Christian truth that is the “fleshy” details of life, the working and serving, the community projects and the committee meetings, the being born, the marrying, and the dying, which are the arenas for our encounter with God-become-flesh in Jesus Christ... *These* are the places where the holiness of God is to be found.” (4)

You know, we will never know if Paul actually got his books and parchments back, or what transpired between him and Alexander, the coppersmith. But we do know this. The nitty, gritty details of being the church together – in all that we do for the sake of Jesus Christ – is worthy of its moment in worship. The announcements are not a thing to be missed. They are indeed our holy, holy, holy script.

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) I am grateful to Scott Black Johnston of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church for his sermon, “God’s Refrigerator Door,” 9/27/09, which both suggested the texts and sparked the idea for including the Announcements in this sermon series on Worship.
- 2) Scott’s observations.
- 3) “Church Bulletin Bloopers,” bible-reading.com/bulletin & tallrite.com/churchbloopers.
- 4) Tom Long, “We Interrupt this Service,” *Shepherds and Bathrobes*, p. 54.