

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for October 24, 2010
Lessons: Joel 2:11-17 and Luke 18:9-14

NO SHOW BUSINESS

When this church began worshiping God in the building we now name the Old Broad Street Church, choirs were forbidden, and so were musical instruments. When the congregation sang hymns, a presenter lined them out, speaking a line which the rest would then sing. The note was given with a tuning fork. Somewhere in the three decades of worship there, a group of young men caused consternation by standing together and harmonizing during the hymns, thereby rebelliously becoming our church's first choir.

Why would Presbyterian churches of that era forbid choirs and musical instruments? These days, we find some churches that seem to exist for little else but the music and many people for whom worship is primarily a musical experience. Of course, we human beings do tend to move from one extreme to the other — from almost none to almost all, from forbidden to primary. Our ancestors in the Presbyterian Church were far more Calvinistic than we are today, and the mandate for them was to make sure all worship, praise, and adoration were given to God and to God alone. Among humans, only Jesus was to be praised, but probably for his divinity far more than his humanity. Worship was a serious matter not supposed to include fun, but above all, it was not to become in any manner a performance for which some human being might be praised or applauded. Clapping in a service would have been deemed an outrage, if anyone had even considered it. Even preaching style drew scrutiny. No communication skill from a minister was to overshadow the message, the word. Meaning was what mattered, not performance-related methods of engaging the people. Worshipers were to listen to God's word, not be entertained by emotionally moving oratory. Theatrics were scorned as antics out of place in true Christian worship. I've never researched the matter, but I strongly suspect that jokes were not part of preaching because the people were not there to laugh or be amused. Puppets, of course, would have been unthinkable, and children would have sat quietly, or else.

I offer two observations here about human nature. We love to take a good idea and push it too far, beyond insightful or helpful to rigid and stifling. We tend, also, when we rebel against the rigid and stifling to throw out the baby with the bath water, discarding the insight with the rules and practices which had carried it too far.

Worship is not a performance, and the Bible assures us that when worship becomes a performance, God hates it. Be careful, though. What the prophets condemn is not human skill, art, or enjoyment but dishonesty. What infuriates and disgusts God is not joy in worship or pleasure in being together for worship; it is not music or even dancing; it is not the skill of the musician or the harmony of the choir; it is not the power of engaging speech or the inclusion of children; it is not laughter or other expressions of joy. What angers God is performance in the sense of phoniness. Literally, the word “hypocrite” identifies an actor on stage in a play; only by extension does “hypocrite” gain its now better known meaning of phony person who plays at piety, virtue, and even friendship in order to achieve some effect for the enhancement of self. God rejects piety that adores self not God and despises morality or virtue that has no compassion for the distressed and no desire for the righting of injustices in society. Like a human being created in God’s image, God takes offense at words or rituals of adoration that express a love not felt or truly offered, a friend only pretending friendship, an admirer offering empty praise meant to flatter for selfish gain.

Contrary to centuries of moralistic criticism, Jesus does not commend the tax collector in his parable for being a sinner but rather for being honest and, therefore, humble before God. He goes to God in search of mercy. The Pharisee goes to God for commendation. Before God, no one is commendable, but, again, be careful here. Our Calvinistic ancestors took that insight much too far, to the extent of regarding all human beings and all things human as despicable and even loathsome. That’s wrong. For Jesus, the opposite of commendable is not despicable but lovable. We are to stop flattering ourselves by dishonest comparisons with other, supposedly less commendable people, not so we can become self-hating but so we can stop pretending to be as we are not and allow ourselves to be loved by God as who we really are. The tax collector, who was a traitor to his own nation and people, presents himself before God as a sinner in need of mercy because that’s who he is. If he hated himself utterly, he would not seek God’s mercy. That he is ashamed of himself Jesus makes apparent by telling us the man will not even raise his eyes toward the heavens as was the custom in prayer. He is too shame-filled to look upward, since he would be looking upward deliberately toward God.

The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable is a good man, indeed a very good man. Exacting in his religious faith and practice, exemplary in his morals, and highly commendable in every way, he stands before God thankful, but what he voices his thankfulness for is his own virtue in the hierarchy of human goodness and piety. God is not impressed. Here, again, for the third time, be careful. In the past, we have countered such religious pride by insisting that all people are deeply sinful in their rotten hearts and corrupt spirits. We have tried to overcome self-congratulations with a doctrine of total depravity, and we have failed. Instead of gaining humility, we have congratulated ourselves for having such correct doctrine, and the application of that doctrine has mostly served to make strict Calvinists contemptuous of

all creatures of flesh and blood and disgusted by any enjoyment of humanity in themselves or others. The Pharisee in the parable prays, “I thank you, God, that I am not like other people.” It’s a prayer of scorn for humanity, not to be corrected by a doctrine of scorn for humanity. We are not created in God’s image and likeness so we can look with contempt upon ourselves and others. The Pharisee’s problem is not that he needs a heavy dose of disgust at himself but that he needs to get rid of his disgust at other people and let himself be human so he can live by the grace of God rather than by his own merit. He needs to let God’s love and mercy lift him above contempt for humanity so he will stop wishing to be commended and learn to be loved.

The story has long been told, and I’ve told it before, of the church school teacher who, having finished a lesson on this parable, asked the children to bow their heads and prayed, “We thank you, God, that we are not like that Pharisee.” So, now I suppose, if we continue to evade the parable’s meaning and message, we can be grateful we are not like that church school teacher. It’s a never-ending story. But it can be ended, and we can emerge into freedom moving toward healing and wholeness. We are not looking for perfection, except as a goal of the one and only kind of perfection to which Jesus calls us, which is the perfection of love which can seek the welfare of even our enemies.

Religious perfection is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms; to be truly and honestly religious is to be humble and compassionate, not perfect. Only God is perfect, but God has no need to be religious, and God’s perfection is that of love anyway, not of some human ideal of cold, sterile, unfeeling, uncaring, all-everything splendor. Why did we take our least appealing qualities and phoniest aspirations, raise them to the level of the supreme, then call the product “God”? A person without compassion is less than human, not more. A person unmoved to caring about the lost or sympathizing with the distressed is spiritually dead. So, why did we let philosophers like Plato, Plotinus, and the Stoics mislead us away from feeling, empathizing, and being moved to compassion, when those are the very attributes of God that make us human?

Worship is not show business because life is not supposed to be show business. How much of life we do turn into a show is embarrassing to admit, but shame is not Jesus’ goal. Humility is not shame but rather the happy state of not being ashamed of being human and needing the grace of God. Real humility is free, not only from false pride, but also from persistent shame.

“Rend your hearts and not your clothing,” says the prophet. Be honestly who you are, even though you’re not quite sure who that is. For Jesus, being honest means being open to God’s love and mercy and open to compassion for each other. Life is a response, not a performance. It’s love’s business, not show business. Amen.