

“Full Worship”  
December 6, 2009

*Prelude Meditation:*

Our call to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind is a call to express that love in worship that is as sincere, vibrant, and artful as it is scriptural.

-- The Phoenix Affirmations

Malachi 3:1-4

Luke 3:1-6

Do you ever wonder why you or anyone else would get up relatively early on a Sunday morning, get yourself and, sometimes, your family presentable, and then walk, ride, or drive to a church, ready and willing to sit, sing, pray, and listen? With so many other choices for how to spend an hour or two on a Sunday morning, what is it that draws you and others to choose church?

If we asked those questions, here in this sanctuary and in churches throughout the centuries, we would get an unending stream of different, sometimes conflicting answers. In times and places where Christianity was and is the dominant religion, one reason for gathering for worship was fear of the consequences of *not* going, consequences related to both life on earth and life in the hereafter. But in the past and in the present, fear is only one part of the picture. Fifty years ago, in most of the U.S., and still today in some parts of the country, going to church on Sunday mornings was or is simply the thing to do if one wasn't Jewish. In certain times and places, going to church (or synagogue) was simply what one did if one wanted to be a good citizen, a good parent, a good person.

In this, as in so many things, times have changed – dramatically and definitely not all for the worse. Today in Sonoma County, for many of us – I hope *most* of us – going to church (or synagogue or mosque or ashram or temple) is what we do intentionally, consciously, and freely, not something we do out of fear or unquestioned habit.

But that doesn't answer the question, Why come to a worship service on this or on any other Sunday morning? I'm sure that if we polled the members and friends of this church, we'd get at least as many different answers as there are members and friends. For instance ... here and in other churches, some people come looking for comfort, some looking for challenge, and yet others looking for company and companionship. Some still come out of a sense of “ought” or “should,” and others come simply because it's something that has simply felt like the “right” thing to do for decades. Some folks may come for the coffee, tea, and nibbles after worship, others for the chance to sing, and yet others because of a longing, a need that can't quite be put into words. Some of you may come to worship because it offers a chance to be with people you know and like and with people you would like to know. Some gather here hoping for a lack of politics, and others gather hoping to hear reflections specifically *about* politics.

In the midst of what is, undoubtedly, a great diversity of reasons, hopes, and desires for gathering here on Sunday mornings, I'd like to explore one particular way of understanding why we gather together for worship. This way of understanding and living our worship life comes from one of the Phoenix Affirmations, the affirmation that's in this morning's order of worship as the Prelude Meditation: Our call to love God with all

our heart, soul, and mind is a call to express that love in worship that is as sincere, vibrant, and artful as it is scriptural.

This affirmation and the other eleven Phoenix Affirmations had their beginning with a group of clergy and laypeople in Phoenix, Arizona, who came together to try to describe an emerging and yet deeply rooted Christian faith, a faith that's been growing for a number of years but is still only infrequently visible in the news and in the public square ... the emerging faith that many call "Progressive Christianity." This group began meeting in Phoenix, and as word of the project spread, pastors, theologians, laypeople, biblical scholars, and other Christian leaders throughout the country joined in. Over time, through conversation and prayer and then more conversation and prayer, this now-national group developed twelve affirmations that described their understanding and vision for Progressive Christianity. I think of these twelve statements as guideposts, a sort of GPS for Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Over the next twelve months, you'll hear about and I hope you'll explore the other eleven affirmations. Today, though, my focus is on affirmation number four and what it suggests about why we gather for worship and what we do when we're here.

In the Phoenix Affirmations describe it, the heart of the Christian faith is taking Jesus at his word, as it's reported in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that the greatest commandments – the most important callings in human life – are to love God with all of who we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves. If that's the heart of the faith, then gathering for worship is one of the ways we can *nurture* those loves in ourselves and one another. It's one of the ways we can be reminded that it's possible to try to *live* with those loves at our center, day after day after day. Worship is one of the ways we can *encounter* those loves, within us and around us. It is one of the ways we can *express* those loves. And it is one of the ways that we can discover what is constricting and limiting those loves in us and in the world.

Those are some of the "whys" of worship. But what about the specifics, the "hows" of worship? What does faithful worship look and feel like in a 21<sup>st</sup> century, progressive Christian church? As the Phoenix Affirmations envision worship, it's meant to be sincere, vibrant, artful, and scriptural. That seems like a lot to ask of one hour – or an hour and fifteen minutes. It might seem like too much to ask, but I don't think it is. I don't think it's too much because those four pieces can come together, each of them enhancing and nourishing the others.

I invite you to think about this with me. Think about what "sincere" worship might mean. ... Sincere worship can mean telling the truth ... the whole truth, the truth that includes doubt and pain and anger and fear, as well as joy, gratitude, and delight. Sincere worship can mean we bring our questions, our laments, our griefs, as well as our discoveries, our laughter, and our hopes.

Sincere worship can mean that on a Sunday like today, we can, in silence, song, prayer, and preaching, share our sadness and shock at the sudden death of an entire family and we can share our anguish that, whatever we think of it as a matter of foreign policy, the United States is once again escalating a war in another country, once again moving toward more bloodshed and loss. At the same time – and in the same worship service – in sincere worship, in silence, song, prayer, and preaching, we can share our giddy delight at the arrival of a child or grandchild in our families or the arrival of a puppy or kitten in our homes. We can celebrate the arrival of new members in our midst,

and celebrate the gifts that departing members have given this church over many years. In sincere worship, the full truths of our lives are welcome here ... the truths that make it hard to love God and neighbor *and* the truths that make love flow from us and through us as easily as warm water flows down a great river.

I invite you, too, to think with me what vibrant and artful worship is and can be. ... Vibrant and artful worship can include different voices, both speaking and singing. It can be rooted in ancient traditions while not being bound by the spoken and unspoken rules of what can and can't be done in a worship service. It can draw on the fullness of what it means to be human and on the breadth of our expressions of love, praise, gratitude, and need. ... And, more to the point for *this* morning, vibrant, artful worship can include *movement*. It can include a celebration that we have been given the gift of life in physical form, in these bodies of all shapes, colors, and sizes ... and it can include a celebration that involves *moving* these physical forms.

The fourth Phoenix Affirmation also affirms the place of scripture in worship. Today, the *scriptural* underpinnings for our worship, which I hope is sincere, vibrant, and artful, are two Advent readings. Malachi and Luke come to us across the centuries, speaking of God's messengers and reminding us of the continuous coming of God into our midst. Malachi and Luke come to us and remind us that preparation is necessary, whether it's through a purifying fire and a cleansing soap or through a realignment of our usual highways and byways of daily life. Malachi and Luke call us to prepare ourselves, to make room for the coming of God into the world in new and surprising ways.

This is an ancient call, and there are as many ways to respond to it as there are people in this room. There is no one right way to respond; there are many. And this morning, with the leadership of Ruth Hoppe, we will all soon be invited to respond, to prepare the way for God, through movement.

Please hear and believe the word "invited." The readings and the message are clear: we are called to prepare ourselves for God's new presence, but the "how" is open to interpretation. If you are moved to respond to this call to prepare with movement, know that your response is welcome here in this worship service. And if you are moved to respond to that call with stillness, know that your response is welcome here. *Full* worship, *faithful* worship, *sincere*, *vibrant*, *artful*, and *scriptural* worship is meant to nourish, challenge, and heal each and every one of us in all of our diversity, whether we choose to move this morning or not.

Amen.

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