

The Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

February 13, 2011

Worship Series 5

Text: Acts 2:42

Theme: "What Have We to Say to God?"

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Today we continue our sermon series on the Holy Liturgy of the Church. Last week we ended at the mountain top of hearing the Word of God read and proclaimed to us. This week, we are descending from the first peak of worship. Good worship is a marathon, not a sprint. It is not a dash to the heights where we stay, basking in the glory of God – that is what Peter wanted on the Mount of Transfiguration where Jesus appeared to him and to James and to John as radiant as the sun. Peter thought that was great and wanted to build some shelters and just live the rest of his life up on the mountain with Jesus. Great for Peter – but what about the rest of us? No, Jesus reminded Peter that life, like worship, is like the ocean tides – surging and receding, surging and receding over and over again and in each surge forward we gain something and in each recession we rest and we ponder what we have gained.

The surges in worship are sacramental. That is, times when God is giving us something amazing like his Word or the Baptismal waters or his own body and blood in the Lord's Supper. The recessions in worship are sacrificial. That is when we are bringing something to God, such as our offerings, our prayers, and our songs.

Today we look at the most sacrificial portion of the Divine Service. As we descend from the Service of the Word, we prepare for the Service of the Sacrament. In the early Church, there was no supply house from which to order the bread and the wine for Holy Communion. People generally made their own unleavened bread for worship and often made their own wine, but even if they bought it there was no church secretary to order it from the store. So at a point in the service just before the Sacrament of the Altar, the people would bring forward their gifts. Often they would be in procession. Some would bring bread, some wine, some money for the support of the pastors and the care of the poor, some food for the hungry. They would lay all their gifts on the altar and the pastor would set aside enough bread and wine to celebrate the Lord's Supper that day and the rest would be saved or reserved for the hungry.

As the people came forward and as the pastor prepared the altar for the celebration of the Sacrament, the people would sing a psalm or psalms. These came to be known as the offertories, which we continue to sing today. The offertory both looks at the blessings God pours down upon us and the blessings that are yet to come in the supper. This is an important time in the worship, although many times we treat it like an intermission. We run to the restroom, whisper to our neighbor, make our grocery list, as though this is just down time. But the offering and the offertory are crucial parts of the worship.

God has spoken and when God speaks, we respond. The master has entered the castle and has called for his stewards whom he left in charge to make an accounting of what they have done. Remember that the money we give during the offering is not given to human beings. It is not given to a budget. It is not given to a program. It is given to God. Now every year we draw up a list of the ministry we feel called to do and we attach approximate price tags to that ministry. These are the ways we would like to spend the money God entrusts to us, but we are always just guessing at how much God might

entrust to us in any given year. We are not the country club where we design a program and then charge dues accordingly. We are one congregation in the Holy Christian Church, trying to pool our gifts and use them to further the kingdom. As that offering plate comes to us, we each make our sacrifice. That is we take a percentage of what God has entrusted to us and return it to him. We are called to give back to him a faithful percentage. Now is the time for you to wrestle with the percentage of your sacrifice. If you are offering \$25 a week to God and you make \$50,000 a year, is 2.5% a faithful offering to him? If you are tossing in \$10 or \$20 a month – is God really only blessing you with a few thousand dollars a year? Is your offering faithful to God?

The ushers bring our sacrifices forward and I place them on the altar beside the body and blood of Christ. Then we continue our sacrifice with the prayers. The prayers are nothing more than verbal sacrifice. We are giving our words to God. Now I know that sometimes our prayers are “Dear God gimme this and dear God gimme that,” but even so, God loves to hear us. I am betting that all of us have someone we love who calls us on the phone, or comes to see us from time to time. When that person talks to you, do they have to have something important to say before you listen? Of course not, you love to hear whatever they have to say. I have watched people in love hang on every word the other says, even if it is the dumbest collection of drivel you’ve ever heard. God is head over heels in love with us. He cannot wait to hear us speak to him again.

Of course the prayers in public worship cannot be said personally and privately for each one of us individually. So, the Church has always tried to offer prayers that build scaffolding upon which you can jointly hang a conversation with God. When I say the Prayer of the Church, I am not trying to pray for every item that needs praying for. Neither do you need me to pray for you because you have every right to go to God directly – you too are welcomed to stand before the living God.

Rather in the public prayers, I am trying to moderate a group discussion. I am trying to bring up an outline of things that we need to discuss with God and while I am saying the official prayer, I am assuming that you are having a more intimate discussion with God around the same or similar issues. The role of the pastor is one of prompter. You are the actors and God is the audience. When we have an audience with the King, now is the time to talk to him about what we see as trouble in our lives and great joy in our lives.

Now remember that God is not speaking to us in prayer. God speaks to us in His Word. Prayer is sacrificial. We are pouring our our hearts to him and he is sitting back and loving every word from us just like dotting grandparents love hearing their grandchildren talk about what is important to them. Prayer is one of the greatest gifts he gives. To have the privilege of speaking to the King of the universe is amazing.

The sacrifice having been made, the prayers having been said, we have rested a little. We have considered what the living God has said to us and we have responded and best we can. Next week we will look at our climb to the second peak, the Lord’s Supper.