

Bruton Parish Church  
The Rev. Ronald P. Jaynes, Interim Rector  
Sunday, August 22, 2010 - Pentecost 13 (Proper 16)

From the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews:

Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

If you are a visitor with us here today, I welcome you. I want you to feel, well, what is it I want you to feel? The temptation is to say that I want you to feel comfortable.

We spend a lot of time planning our services so that they are “user-friendly.” But to feel comfortable in church as we gather for worship is not what the writer of Hebrews had in mind when he speaks of “an acceptable worship with reverence and awe.”

No, what that writer was saying to a second generation discouraged group of Christians was that to come into the presence of God for Sunday worship is to risk encounter with the living, fire-breathing restless spirit of truth. In worship we are met by the Living God. That is the glory and the risk of Sunday worship. When you walked down Duke of Gloucester Street, you were, as the old spiritual has it ... Marching to Zion, the beautiful city of God.

Annie Dillard, the writer, has the most wonderful description of the different ways people view worship in her book: *Holy the Firm*. She writes during a time she lived on a small island in Puget Sound, and this is what she wrote about worship on that island.

“There is one church here, so I go to it. On Sunday mornings I quit the house and wander down the hill to the white-framed church in the firs. On a big Sunday there might be twenty of us there, often I am the only person under sixty. The members are of mixed denominations; the minister is a Congregationalist and wears a white shirt. The man knows God. Once in the middle of the long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world, for the gift of wisdom to its leaders, for hope and mercy to the grieving and pained, succor to the oppressed, and God’s grace to all – in the middle of this and stopped, and burst out, ‘Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week.’ After a shocked pause, he continued reading the prayer. Because of this, I like him very much.”

She continues: “The higher (liturgical) Christian churches – where, if anywhere, I belong – come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God.

I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed. In the high churches, they saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of

scaffolding who have long since forgotten the danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked. But in the low churches you expect it at any minute. This is the beginning of wisdom."

What do we expect when we come to worship? I know that, for me, I still get nervous before coming in here.

William Willimon said of preaching at Duke Chapel that he still gets the chills, still gets the shakes and still keeps stomach medicine in his Gothic washroom. He said, "The place is big, dark, threatening. And there are Sundays when, even though we've got it planned, nailed down, and the order of service all worked out, God Almighty still manages to reach in here and grab us by the neck and shake us ... doesn't happen often, but it does happen. Knowing that it can happen keeps me reaching for the Maalox." JB Phillips in his little book written years ago: *Your God is Too Small* suggests that 'Christianity has degenerated into churchiness ... and the cause of that is the worship of an inadequate god, a ramped and regulated god who is a 'good churchman' according to the formulas of the worshiper.'

Soren Kierkegaard \* in about 1850 wrote that he believed Christians have gotten confused about whose doing what in worship: we think of worshippers as an audience; (look at the way most churches have worshippers sitting – as if they were the audience) pastors as entertainers; and God as the prompter. In fact, he said, worshippers are the performers; pastors are prompters; and God is the audience.

So, what is the point? To ask us each to consider this question: when we come to church on Sunday morning, is it in the hope to get something out of it? The old filling station model – come to church and get filled up for the living of another week? Or, do we come because we have something to do when we get here.

The answer is not necessarily one or the other ... we hope that it is both ... but like the prayer of St Francis, it is in giving that we receive. That is the point of Annie Dillard, of Will Willimon, of Soren Kirkegaard. And most emphatically it is the point of the writer to the Hebrews! When we gather for worship, whether in a storefront chapel or a cathedral with thousands, we perform a drama with different parts – speaking, listening (that's a very active role) singing, praying, giving our tithes and offerings, baptizing, eating bread and drinking wine – all for the delight of God. We are delighted when our senses are pleased by all of this, but, at the end of the show, the only applause that matters comes from God.

"Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe." AMEN.

1Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is To Will One Thing*, Trans. Douglas Steere (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948) pp.180-181.