

Why Worship!

Our stories of why we worship, and why we worship and serve specifically at St. Richard's Episcopal Church are different. Each of us is a different person. We bring our uniqueness together here in many ways.

Here is my story. Think of your story as you read mine.

I moved to Florida at the end of 2006. I retired from serving Holy Faith Church-Episcopal and Lutheran, in Michigan. I was exhausted with church – 36 years in active parish ministry, the last 11 of which were interim ministries. I served nine parishes. I decided to “take a break from church.” Perhaps you've done that at some time. Perhaps you are doing that now. My break lasted about six months. It was nice; we could go to the beach on Sundays, or to a Disney Park. But then the ache for worship began.

For reasons I cannot remember, I discovered that an old acquaintance from grad school was an assisting priest at St. Richard's. I attended one Sunday. It was just what I was looking for, what I needed. Episcopal liturgy, sung psalms, tasteful Eucharist. It was quiet and easy-going. The parish was in the midst of an interim. I was not overwhelmed by extroverted welcomes, which was good for me. I started coming back regularly. Someone complimented my singing of hymns. I visited Fr. Downs in his office; we hit it off well.

Slowly, I discovered that St. Richard's is a diverse and welcoming, inclusive congregation. I had been told I wouldn't find such a parish in central Florida, by a bishop no less!

One weekend evening, I came to a supper at church. People were warm and accepting. I was made to feel at home. I was at home. I am at home. Little did I know that I would have some small part in discovering Alison Harrity and becoming a part of her clergy staff. God works in mysterious ways.

How is God working in you? Have you found home? Are you at home at St. Richard's? Have you wandered away from home as we all do from time to time, sometimes for good reasons and sometimes because of wanderlust and sometimes for reasons that we don't understand or that just don't make good sense?

This is going to be a series of six articles in subsequent issues of the eNews. If they speak to you, that will be good. If you are at home, enjoy. If you have wandered from home, give these reflections a read, and see what happens.

As I look back on the first half of 2007, I'm not sorry that I took a break from church. It had been a long and successful, but stressful career. Many of you know what some of those stresses entailed. Breaks are OK. Retreats are OK. But, home still beckons wherever we find it. I found my new spiritual home in worship first. But, the roots deepened as I met more people, as I joined the choir, as I was invited to preach.

What makes us wander away at times? What causes us to retreat? Did you ever want to run away from home when you were very young? Maybe you didn't want to do the jobs mother assigned. Maybe you resented dad's discipline. Maybe you were bullied at school and wanted to flee. Maybe you didn't like some of the people in your family, or what you were supposed to do after school or on weekends. Maybe your home was a troubled place.

I came home. Is every little thing to my liking? Of course, it isn't. Is home a challenge? All homes are a challenge. But, is it lonely out there away from home? I suspect it is.

We'll talk more next week.

+ Dale Truscott

Why Worship? Part 2. Is This an Important Reason for You? Are You Missing This?

When followers of Jesus who had had resurrection experiences of him came together to worship, they did two things – they worshipped as if they were in the synagogue, and they continued the table fellowship they had had with Jesus. Two thousand years later, we still do what they did. The first portion of our worship on Sunday is a study of the Word of God in scripture with an interpretation by the teacher/preacher. The second portion is a meal of consecrated bread and wine that becomes for us the Body and Blood of Jesus, in other words, the Real Presence of Jesus in that same table fellowship that he had with his disciples.

We are bold enough to call it The Means of Grace! Wow! This worship is the way we get God's grace and love to come into us. Does this mean that we cannot experience God's love outside of Sunday worship? No! God's love surrounds us all the time. Does this mean that we cannot "get grace" alone or at home? No! The grace of God is a gift that is always present with us. But...Sunday is the center of it all, and Word and Sacrament worship with our fellow Christians at St. Richard's is the very heart of our Christian life.

"But, we don't like the hymns. The crying baby bothers us. The time is inconvenient. They don't always use the prayers we grew up with. People don't dress properly anymore. We don't feel comfortable being casual – or dressed up. There aren't many young people there, and we are young. Many of our old friends have died, and we don't feel the same at worship. Our marital status has changed, and we don't feel welcome. We don't like the length of the sermons – too short, too long. We don't like one or some of the preachers. Incense makes me cough. Some of those people are "different" from us. I'm on the 'outs' with someone there. What is happening to our Episcopal Church? It's too liberal, not liberal enough, talks about politics too much, doesn't deal with current societal problems enough....."

Here is the truth for me. I suspect it is or can be the truth for you. The people of St. Richard's love me. "See how they love one another." (Acts of the Apostles) It is true at St. Richard's. Now, we are all human, so that love is not always consistent or perfect. But, I've served in parishes for 48 years. I've seen congregations that loved each other as much as we do, but never have I seen one that loved any more. It simply isn't greener on the other side of the fence, my friends. Maybe some of you reading this have explored and have discovered that. Maybe you've retreated to the quiet and safety of your own home. Maybe you have replaced church with the brunch at the club, or the weekend trip to relatives, or just to the sunny morning coffee beside your own pool.

I implore you in the same way Christians have implored one another all along. Word and Sacrament worship is your center as a Christian. It IS the means of grace. It is the community of faith and love. And, with all our bumps and bruises and faults, we love you and one another with the *agapé* kind of love that Jesus taught. "Do you love me?" Jesus said to Peter. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." "Then feed my lambs."

Come and help us feed the lambs, you, and all the others, with the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation. Come to encounter the Word of God. And come for all that surrounds worship in a vibrant parish like this one – smiles, conversations, food, mutual care, outreach ministry, learning, singing, playing, laughing, crying, being Jesus for the world.

If you haven't been at worship lately, don't you miss it? If you worship regularly, don't you love it, even when the hymn is new? If you have a problem with it, won't you let us know? We'd like to try to help.

The Westminster Catechism has a wonderful definition of worship. "Worship is to praise God and enjoy God forever."

I'll see you at St. Richard's this week. Sundays at 8:00, 10:30, and 5:00.

+Dale Truscott

Why We Worship, Part 3, Mutual Consolation of the Brothers and Sisters. Do You Feel Consoled?

If you have stopped coming to St. Richard's worship or other activities, and you have not stopped for health or other necessary reasons, you have interrupted your pilgrimage of faith. You may be missing what we call "the mutual consolation of the brothers and sisters." Do you feel consoled? Do you not feel consoled? Perhaps you don't feel consoled at church. Perhaps you don't feel consoled away from church. What is going on here?

"If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." Philippians 2:1-2

Isn't that an amazing scripture? An amazing sentiment? Be of the same mind.

While we all say we want unity, unity of spirit, of mind, of opinion, of attitude, of motivation, we rarely find it. We rarely achieve it. But, you and I know that being in full accord and of one mind is central to our wellbeing. Remember the times you have been in family holiday dinners with everyone present and conversing/sharing, happy to be there in one another's company. Past differences may not have vanished. Uncle Henry may still be weird. But for a while at the table with wonderful food and wine, misunderstandings lose their strength and importance. Unity becomes a lived reality. In the passage I quoted from Philippians, Paul is writing to this church from prison. He is in danger for his life. And he writes about unity and joy and about the wonderful relationship he has to this congregation.

Yet, he hears that there are conflicts in the community. He invites them to take a closer look to the heart of the gift they have received in Christ Jesus. Having the 'same mind' in Jesus is the opposite of division and quarrels that remove us from the mutual consolation of the brothers and sisters. There is a powerful force at work in you and me as a part of the Christian community that we call Church. It is the mind of Christ, a dynamic presence of Jesus here and now. It can turn strangers into friends, and even into family.

At the end of each Sunday liturgy at St. Richard's, we send members out with little communion kits full of consecrated bread and wine, the Body and Blood of Christ, to folks who, for sickness or whatever reasons, cannot be with us. Every Lay Eucharistic Minister is an amazing person. Indulge me in singling out two of them. Burr Anderson is a wonderful churchperson; he has been at St. Richard's "forever." He does "everything." Yet, he is crippled and walks with some difficulty. Sandy Engert has been here "forever," too. She organized some of the best congregational dinners I have ever had in my 45 years of ministry in churches. Yet she recently had a stroke and is recovering nicely. These are two of our Eucharistic Ministers – people who need consolation, but who bring consolation to the brothers and sisters. Isn't that amazing?

Do you miss this? Or, are you thrilling to this every Sunday? Everything that might try to separate us from this amazing community pales...pales at the profound joy of mutual consolation of the brothers and sisters."

This is why we worship. We are a part of the universal community of faith, specifically this one little outpost of openness, diversity, cultural vitality in central Florida called St. Richard's. We gather around nothing less than the Very Body and Blood of Christ and Jesus' words about our God to us. We console one another in the midst of our pilgrimages of faith.

What could be more beautiful and profound! If you have wandered away for reasons of your own, we deeply miss you. And we will share our loneliness without you if you will let us do so. Every week! 8:00, 10:30, 5:00. Come and console and be consoled in Jesus.

+Dale Truscott

Why Worship? Part 4, To Find An Ethical Life

One of the things that concerns me as church membership and attendance wanes in our post-modern culture is that we may lose one of the great sources of ethics. How will we know right from wrong, good from bad, without faith and the practice of the faith in worship?

Now, I'm a teacher of Ethics and Critical Thinking at the college level. There are many ethical theories. The Divine Command Theory is only one of them. The idea that God has commanded us about how to live – in the Ten Commandments, in the Levitical laws, in the various moral statements in the Bible, in the words and actions of Jesus of Nazareth – is the Divine Command Theory. This is what we call a “non-consequential” theory. One does right and does not do wrong because she is commanded so, not because of outcomes. There are other “non-consequential” theories. We do right because we have a good character, possess virtues. We do right because we can logically reason what is our duty. We do right because it is a product of caring. We do right because we want to be an authentic person. And there are “consequential” theories. We do this or that because it serves our self, our personal wants and desires. We do this or that because it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. Or, we do what we do because, heaven forbid, the end justifies the means.

Sam Harris, a well-known philosopher and neuroscientist, a critic of religion, wrote a book in 2010 called *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. Harris believes, contrary to common notions, that science can define an ethic, and that ethic will *not* be relativism. Harris tries to show that morally good things have to do with the well-being of conscious creatures. What makes us flourish as a species will become our ethic, he states. I don't have any qualms with this as a religious leader, perhaps surprisingly. But, an evolutionary approach to an ethic can be shockingly unkind. Survival of the fittest, and in this case the most naturally ethical in promoting the proliferation of humanity, can have some ugly sides, Social Darwinism is one monstrous example.

Much of what is going on in our world today, in politics, in warfare, in violence, in society in general some might contend will ultimately promote us in some way. But is it ethical? Is it moral? Regardless of how we juggle the theories of ethics, our faith informs us about how to handle the tough issues that come up every day. Our faith and our worship within our faith doesn't just give us divine commands; it gives us religious lifestyle, inspiration, virtue, commitment, long-suffering, and love.

So, if you have drifted away from worship, from participation in the life of St. Richard's, your foundation of ethical judgment may be found wanting. I'm not saying you cannot function without church on Sunday. But, I am saying that your life is a bit impoverished. Wise moral judgment is in every prayer, every sermon, every hymn and anthem, even in the ceremonial that surrounds it all. Worship is an aesthetic demonstration of the good life, the ethical life. It is a theater of the Christian life.

Maybe you have strayed away for very good reasons, and maybe those reasons need to be addressed by us and by you. But consider, on the other hand, the loss of being absent from the worshipping experience, the worshipping community. I would miss the symbol of that golden Gospel book carried through the church to proclaim the good news – note, the news is “good,” and that is an ethical word. I would miss the quiet holiness of the altar rail and that tiny but potent meal of waferlike bread and sweet wine. I would miss the smiles and handshakes, the words of encouragement and hearty welcomes, the engagement with people I can relate to.

Some people go to church to get a Command Ethic that they can lord over others. We go to church to share a human ethic that is fed and watered by the Spirit of God and the spirit of love.

+Dale Truscott

Why Worship? Outside, Inside, and About

Why do you go to church? Why did you used to go to church? Why might you consider going to church? Again?

It is said that a certain proportion of people who go to church go for what are called “extrinsic” reasons. They go because it is “the right thing to do.” Perhaps they meet business associates there, or neighborhood friends, or family, or sports companions. I once sponsored a Gourmet Club in one of my churches. It was so successful that it attracted a few non-members. So did the Bridge Club. But, when these clubs had “run their course,” the new people disappeared. Many churches sponsor day care centers and nursery schools as an evangelism tool. It doesn’t work! The reason it doesn’t work is that the people involved in the schools see no extrinsic reason to explore the church that provides the school or rents the space. Weddings rarely produce active church members either. Neither do baptisms unless there are strong family ties or obligations to “grandma” who is a faithful worshipper. The problem with extrinsic churchgoers is that they go for the associations and may or may not encounter the gospel while they are there, or it just may not stick with them or make an impression.

Another grouping of churchgoers is called “intrinsic” churchgoers. These don’t see church as a means to an end, like the extrinsic people. Intrinsic worshippers see church as an end in itself. They are “into” their religion. They may have grown up in church or found church later, but they really believe what the church teaches and are emotionally, morally and doctrinally committed to it. For many intrinsic people, church is the most important involvement in their lives. They truly live religion. While this level of commitment is admirable, if people of diverse backgrounds of race, sexual orientation or even socio-economic status show up, they can be put off by it. “Growth and change are breaking up that old gang of mine,” was the title of a sermon I preached in my large suburban church in Ohio. I can’t say it pleased the crowd very much. In churches much more conservative than St. Richard’s, this intrinsic point of view can include fundamentalist, literalist doctrine that openly excludes non-believer, outsiders and those who don’t “fit.”

Sociologists of religion also identify a group called “quest” churchgoers. These are people on a search for meaning in their lives, trying to find out whether religion might fulfil all or part of their quest. They tend to be tentative, questioning, not willing to commit deeply to responsibilities or commitments within the congregation. Many millennials belong to this group. They are searching for spirituality, but are very skeptical about finding it in organized religion. Those who might search in a place known for openness like St. Richard’s might attend sporadically but avoid our efforts to “snag” them through books to sign, free pens or other gimmicks.

St. Richard’s probably contains a percentage of each of these orientation groups among its members and attenders. They can be compatible, but they can also clash. Extrinsic people often disappear when the people they wanted to be associated with aren’t there anymore. Intrinsic people are the most faithful. They are deeply committed to the faith of the church and active in volunteering and leadership. But they can get their feelings hurt easily. Questers are searching. If they find “it,” they can be wonderful. If they don’t find, they will disappear.

Where do you fall in this analysis? Maybe you are a combination. Maybe you aren’t coming anymore for some aspect of the reasons mentioned here. What would fulfill the faith dimension of your life? Do you miss St. Richards? Is St. Richard’s your home? Have you drifted

away from home? Can our reasons for being churchgoers change? Can we help you? Can we affirm one another in our differences? Jesus was good at understanding all of this.

+Dale Truscott

Why Worship, Part 6, With Angels and Archangels and All the Company of Heaven

What we rather cryptically call the Proper Preface, the beginning of the Prayer of Thanksgiving that is the consecration and preparation of and for holy communion, always has this phrase: "Therefore, with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify..."

I make no apologies for this series of articles in the eNews. I'm trying to catch the attention of some of you who receive this email, and who read it, but who aren't regular worshippers/participants in St. Richard's Episcopal Church. All of us have different religious experiences, so I wouldn't dare judge. But, I'd bet that the primary place we can experience time with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven is in the worship service, a worship service that you just might be missing lately. The only other place where we will experience angels and archangels and all the company of heaven will be after we are dead. Maybe that is a theme for another group of articles.

Why would one want to miss being with angels and archangels? Strange, isn't it? Sometimes we absent ourselves from the things we love the most. It happens in marriages, friendships, careers, and in church. It is part of human nature. The church might call it "sin." But, what have we said when we say that? Guilt trips don't result in the joy of being with angels and archangels. The church has been too good at guilt trips for centuries and often not so good at truly relishing fellowship with angels and archangels.

And what is it that we sing when we are with angels and archangels in church? We sing what the young Isaiah heard when he had his vision in the Hebrew temple about 2,600 years ago. He saw God on a throne with six-winged seraphs hovering over. And the seraphs sang what we sing every Sunday, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory." And then we switch to what the followers of Jesus sang as he entered the holy city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." Singing with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven! Who would want to miss such a profound, mystical and wonderful experience?

And yet, many of us miss it a lot. Or we miss it often.

I have found St. Richard's to be a treasure in my life. I love to sing with angels and archangels. It's a trip! I have found in this parish a profoundly welcoming and inclusive community of faith. I've served lots of churches in my career. They were all "welcoming;" they all smiled and shook hands and bubbled over prospective or returning members. But few were *profoundly* welcoming in that they truly absorbed others into themselves with no pretensions and no hesitations. This is a body of believers that enjoys growing, not without some human trepidation at times, to be sure, but still truly enjoys embracing people and its own future. That is very rare, let me tell you from experience, rare indeed!

What would happen if you returned from a time away? Would someone in the corner whisper to another, "Look, there's so-in-so; haven't seen them forever." Yes, that would probably happen. But, after a warm welcome to you personally, you would find yourself quietly and affirmingly part of the family again. We might not embarrass you with the prodigal's festival. You would not be singled out, but you would be included with quiet joy.

What would happen if you visited for the first or second time? Well, the rector might single you out in worship and give you a pen and ask the rest of us to be nice to you. And that might be a thrill or an embarrassment depending on your personality type. But, then you would find yourself part of a family of faith that, I believe, would be uniquely special for you.

The angels and archangels and all the company of heaven are waiting, inviting you to come and sing, even if you can't sing or think you can't sing. For this is a song of the heart, and our hearts are virtuosos at song.

I started by mentioning the Westminster Catechism. I used it to start and end my Liturgy course at the seminary in Ohio where I was adjunct professor. The purpose of worship is to praise God and to enjoy God forever. The young Isaiah was touched by the seraphs. Then he said, "Here am I, send me."

+Dale Truscott