

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. A sermon preached on October 8, 2017 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons: EXODUS 35:30-36:7
HEBREWS 9:1-5

My home church of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Welland, Ontario was not architecturally unique.

Though I have since learned it had elements in its upper window designs and trims that made it interesting to devotees of southern Ontario churches.

It had pews,
Two side aisle,
A centre pulpit below which sat the choir.
The organist was farther down the chancel, his head covered by a half curtain on a brass rail.
The organ was a 1930's Casavant pipe organ with lots of bottom.
Every window was stained glass, depicting a Bible scene, a disciple or a saint.
There was even a window dedicated to St. Cecilia – patron saint of music – that had been given in memory of former choir members.

At the back of the church there is a large and spectacular window portraying the Risen Christ and the soldiers lying stunned on the ground.

The décor was never over the top, nor ostentatious, but the generations of parishioners at St. Andrew's before me had wanted their church to be a place of beauty
It was to be a place reflective of God's creative gifts. It was in a word, "the best the congregation could afford"

No factory seconds or any old thing would do!!

It was not a perfect congregation.

There were many things and many people who seemed to major in minors
But when it came to the building itself, there was rarely any drawn out wrangling or debate about the building's upkeep and maintenance.
Even large projects like installing protective covers for the windows,
Pointing the stone work
Revoicing the organ
Replacing the carpet -there were always funds made available or given.

We were not a super wealthy congregation. Welland was then an industry based city. Sure there were some high rollers, but the congregation was made up largely of small business people, teachers, some doctors, some lawyers, and

workers in the various industries and plants in the city.

we were though a congregation that for the most part believed *that only the best was worthy of God's House.*

That is what I grew up with and I thought all congregations thought this way.

I have discovered during over 30+ years of parish ministry, not all congregations think this way.

Most do the best they can,
But with the declining membership, growing deficits in many mainline church buildings, it is harder and harder to hold to this.

For example, St. Andrew's Welland is not the church of my childhood,
Nor is the city for that matter.

The congregation long ago ceased to be a worshipping congregation of 200+ on a Sunday morning

Like many PCC churches, it struggles to pay ongoing expenses and meet its financial commitments and obligations to others.

And they have moved to part time ministry.
I would like to think that "nothing is too good for God's House' is still in play
That worshipping God in a place of beauty, a place that reflects our best

A place that reflects that we worship among other things, a God who creates and has given to each of us creative gifts”

But I do not know now!

Such beliefs may have fallen under the immediate pressures of deficits and declining membership.

And I am saddened when I see this happen or when congregations decide to let an attitude of any old thing will do for God’s House become the norm.

Now hear me, I know that some of God’s Houses are money pits today – window reglazing and releading , steeple replacement and repairs, stone pointing are big ticket items.

As well, big buildings take a lot of money to maintain.

But I also believe there are creative ways to ensure that nothing is too good for God’s House.

Sadly what happens is that creativity seems too often take a back seat to budgets, deficits and expenses.

The bottom line replaces how can we make this place a place of beauty for God.

Because that is what worship involves – making a space or a place where God can be worshipped as the hymn phrases it “in the beauty of holiness”

Where His majesty, his awesomeness, his holiness is celebrated.

I maintain none of us can do that as well as we might and ought in a place where any old thing will do,

A place that resembles a second hand store full of factory seconds and retreads.

God's House must always reflect something for Him.

Hear me again, that does not mean it must be large, grand and impressive.

Anne read this morning from Exodus, where Bazalel and Ololeab are appointed to design and build the first Temple – the first worship place of the Israelites.

It was not a big, grand place, set in impressive grounds.

Essentially it was a large tent that was portable.

But again, what the writer of Exodus clearly outlines to us – *it was the best the people could afford.*

And note, the campaign for building the Tent of meeting was oversubscribed.

The Israelites were responding out of the lavish generosity God had continued to show to them.

This Tent of meeting was to *remind the people that God was in their midst.*

That God would go before them whenever they moved

And God would be in their midst wherever they stayed.

That was a long time ago you say.

What does the design and careful construction of the Tent of Meeting in the Desert have to say to us worshipping this morning in a more permanent structure.

Though we know as did the Israelites that God's presence cannot be confined to any structure, the careful construction of the Tent of Meeting is a call for any congregation to ensure that their worship space is carefully cared for and maintained.

There was nothing shoddy or slipshod about the Tent of Meeting – there must be nothing shoddy or slipshod about our worship space.

There is a story told of a minister who was really ticked at his congregation one morning. He was weary of their penny pinching for basic maintenance and upkeep of their building.

His prayer that morning over the offering ran along these lines,

“Lord Jesus, no matter what we say and do this is what we think of you.”

He was not immediately removed, but it sure made people sit up, listen and think!

What are we saying about the Lord if the worship space is dowdy and tired looking.

If basic repairs are not being done.

Does the worship space accurately reflect the people who worship there?

If not, then what could be done to alter this?

Most worship spaces I have been in have great “bones”, but many times they do not clearly reflect the people who gather.

Beauty for God, which is an important part of worship is also reflected *in how we Gather, lead and participate in regular worship. Are we giving to God our best?*

For remember, He is the audience – we are worshipping Him. – all of us.

I was fortunate to have had mentors and teachers along the way who showed, taught and critiqued basics in worship leadership such as public reading of scriptures, preaching, praying, hymnology, simple movement in the service.

I have tried to remember their lessons and their faces come to mind when I do not.

I am not saying beauty for God is to be rigid – Gosh, Presbyterians already carry with them an erroneous assumption that we never commit a pleasure

However, Beauty for God is not reflected well with poor preparation and disorganization.

Sloppy and disorganized makes everyone twitchy and one cannot worship God well if one is twitchy. It erodes the sense of knowing God to be in our midst.

As for participation in worship if one is
not one of the principals in worship
leadership

Well I have told you about the lady who
registered her displeasure about a particular hymn
by snapping a hymn book shut during a pause in
the music.

I've never seen that sort of level of disruption again
I wonder though what she was thinking when
she did this.

What was her attitude to God? Or did she even
think about that?

I wonder did she even consider those sitting around
her and how it was disruptive to them.

I have to ask the same question of those who attend
worship and then proceed to whisper or make
comment throughout a service.

Again, I do not want to be rigid about this, but
think for a moment when you do this, what is your
attitude to God?

Beauty for God, which is an important part of
worship is also reflected *when those gathered affirm,
encourage, provide hope and perspective for one another.*

The Psalmist so evocatively spells out the benefits
of this sense of community in Psalm 133

**How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!**

**²It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,**

**running down on Aaron's beard,
 down on the collar of his robe.
³ It is as if the dew of Hermon
 were falling on Mount Zion.
 For there the LORD bestows his blessing,
 even life forevermore.**

We have spoken about the importance of harmony in the community of faith and how to achieve it and hold onto it at other times.

Here in the context of Beauty for God, let me underline again how crucial it is to worship and live together in harmony as a community of faith.

Does that mean there will not be disagreements or differing points of view? No...there will be times of disagreement.

I am under no illusion that some disagreements can be nasty owing to hurt feelings, misunderstandings and pride

The Psalmist though points to an achievable goal.

"...living together in unity."

Accepting differences and differing points of view
 Seeing this as strength, not a continual source of tension.

Jesus' teaching was quite clear was it not – love God,

Love other people – other includes the ones that are difficult and awkward.

Easy to do all the time – don't you believe it.

It is hard. It takes time. It takes energy. It may mean compromise or admitting that maybe just maybe you made the mistake or it's your fault.

But a faith community that is not united in its worship of God,

Denies that Jesus died on the cross as much for that person with whom you are "out of charity" as He did for you.

Is in for a very rough ride.

Today, newcomers are particularly sensitive to a community that is united by spite or negative energy.

Newcomers do not want any part of such a community – and one cannot blame them for most peoples' lives today are stressful.

They do not want more conflict and silly group politics!

What people are seeking is a place where the presence of God is recognized, acknowledged encouraged and fostered

A safe place in stormy seas to use a Biblical image. The call and the challenge then is to continue to *Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.*