

Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, 3
Passionate Worship

Revelation 5:11-13

I was driving up to the Annual Conference Office in Ocean, NJ, earlier this week, listening to an interview of Phillies manager Charlie Manuel, on the radio. He seems like a pretty good guy, btw. But he was talking about the Phillies crowd on the night of Game six of the NLCS. So many of you watched that game, you will remember this – the Giants pitcher in the 2nd inning (Sanchez?) was just unraveling. And Charlie stated what we all knew: *“It was the crowd that got him out of the game... they got to him!”*

Now, everyone in America who is a sports fan knows about the reputation of the Philadelphia fans. The whole mythology – booing Santa, and all that. A lot of that criticism is undeserved, as bad behavior happens at every ballpark, unfortunately. But one thing you have to admit: when it comes to Philly sports fans, they are unmatched in their *passion*. Sanchez wasn't the first pitcher to fall apart under the withering, relentless drone of Citizens Bank Park fans; you could see it happening in the Reds series, too. Hi Def TV allows us these days to watch the beads of sweat forming on the forehead of the opposition's pitcher...as the crowd gets louder and louder.

They are passionate fans.

Passionate. How many of you went to one of those playoff games? Did you yell? Were you loud? Of course you were; I would have been, too, had I a chance to go. I mean, I yelled at the TV! (Ask Dianna!) Stupid, but true.

Of course, passion isn't always demonstrated through volume (i.e., getting 'loud')...but, really, it's hard to think of a time when an increase in our verbal “volume”, is *not* an indication of an increase in our passion at that moment. They kind of go together. We get excited about a game... we yell! We cheer! We *Boo*, (if we're in Philadelphia!).

Ever been on a Roller Coaster? Do you sit there quiet, and sedate? Hands folded on your lap? And think... “This is very nice.” I doubt it – if you did you needed to ask for your money back.

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I remember when each of our children rode a two wheel bike for the first time...Dianna and I were out there in that parking lot, cheering for them! “Yes! Good job! Keep it up! WATCH OUT!! BRAKE!!!” Volume = passion!

Another *physical* indicator of internal passion is movement. When you’re excited about something, you can’t just sit still! (Ask any child!) Ask my dog! Her tail wags so hard, her whole body shakes. And that’s just to welcome *me* home. For lunch! (That’s why dogs are so great!)

Now *another* response to passion is sometimes just the opposite – silence. There are times when I’m been out in the woods, hiking... and I come across a scene – a mountain vista, a waterfall, a gentle slope covered with wildflowers that have just bloomed, a stand of deer... and (while I’ve actually heard others come to places like that and spontaneously give a big “Whoop!”) *my* typical response there is to get very quiet... just to stand in awe of the beauty of the creation that God has made for us – for *me* – to enjoy. I often, too, will stop in those moments and say a prayer of thanks to God for the gift of this place, and for the physical health to be able to get to it, and for God’s presence in it that makes it all the more wonderful.

Well, did you ever stop to think that *all* of these responses are also Biblical expressions of worship? (Except for the booing!) You know, silence – there’s an obvious connection with worship *there*. Stopping to pray at a place of Beauty, to thank the Creator, *is* an act of worship, isn’t it? It’s one way to worship. Habakkuk 2:20 “*The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.*” Or Psalm 42:10, “*Be still and know that I am God.*” Be quiet! God is here.

But that’s not all of it.

In **Ezra 3** there is an interesting story. A small remnant of the Hebrew people had been allowed to return to the land of Israel after the Exile. And there, under Ezra’s leadership (Ezra was a priest), they laid the foundation stones for a new Temple – the Temple was the centerpiece of their faith in God. The old Temple had been destroyed in the invasion of Jerusalem some 70

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years before. So the foundation of this new Temple was laid, and that invoked a *physical* response among the people. Here's what we read (vs. 12 – 13):

But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

That is *passionate* worship! Tears of sadness, yes – remembering what was lost... But also tears of happiness and *shouts* of joy because after nearly a whole generation had gone by, the people were back in their Land. God *hadn't* abandoned them forever! Their hope was restored. They couldn't keep silent!

This wasn't an occasion to sit quietly in a worship service, with all proper decorum and pomposity...and sing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness". Man, this was real, this was *passionate!* This was a heart response to God's presence among them.

There are too many instances to read them all in just the Book of Psalms (which is the Bible's book of Worship) of passages that speak of Passionate Worship. Worship that involves all we've been talking about: *loud* praise, body movement, silence.

Psalm 33:3

Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.

Psalm 42:4

These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.

Psalm 150: 4-5

...praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, ...praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with loud resounding cymbals.

We're up to part 3 in a six-part series called "*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*". We started the series with "Radical Hospitality", which is basically, sharing with the world the same invitation that God, in Christ, has given to each of us.

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That is, the invitation to come to his table of Grace, to find forgiveness and hope. To find real, and lasting peace in a world of turmoil and hopelessness. It's our great privilege to share that message with our world – our hurting, lost, dysfunctional, world. And when we do that, that's Radical Hospitality.

Passionate Worship, today's message, is another way that we respond to God's Grace and the Good News of God's Love for each us. Passionate Worship is more than simply following the Rubrics listed on a page in a church bulletin. It's more than going through some litanies, and more than even just enjoying the repetition of lifelong liturgies that we have grown comfortable in through our years.

That's where the "Passionate" part comes into it – because our participation in those services, and liturgies (ancient and modern) is an expression of a deep truth defining *who we are*. Passionate Worship is meeting with God, knowing that *I have been redeemed!* **I** have been made new! God loves *me*, even *me!* And I have a place in the Kingdom of God, not just now, but forever! Passionate worship recognizes that I have an extended family in Christ, and it is a joyful thing to meet at the Father's feet with them.

Now, friends, I don't know how to sit still, or be quiet for too long in such an atmosphere! I am constrained by respect for the history of my esteemed predecessors who have stood in this pulpit, so I rarely yell or shout, *per se*. (And that's not really me, anyway!) But do I tend to turn my mike off during the hymn singing... and I have many moments when I'm playing the guitar at one of the two services, or standing in the back of the chapel at 8:30, or in a Robe in the Chancel at 11:00 when I simply need to be still... as I listen to the singing, look at your faces, and I *know* God is here, and I am in awe in the presence of God in this place.

Our web domain name for many years has been "MeetwithGod", and truly that is because that's what, of all things, we hope will happen here... in everything we do, from outreach to 'in-reach', from service to the world beyond these walls, to providing ways for you to grow in your faith, our hope is that along the way, you, and many others would "Meet with God", in holy encounters that will touch you and change you forever. But you know, of all the things that we do together

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here, the one place that these meetings are most likely to happen are our corporate Worship services.

And I believe that this is the way God has planned it. It is a good thing – as I tried to point out last week – that, in our plans for intentional spiritual growth (which is really the only way spiritual growth happens!), that we include *both* private and public (corporate) expressions of our faith. We need to have private times built into our lives where we encounter God – through Scripture reading and study, through prayer, through silence, and so forth.

But just as importantly, and in some ways even *more* importantly, we need also to meet together to worship. This is the one place, more than any other, where God touches hearts.

Bishop Schnase in his book, Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations puts it like this:

“Comprehending the meaning of worship requires looking beyond *what people do* to see with the eyes of faith *what God does*. God uses worship to transform lives, heal wounded souls, renew hope, shape decisions, provoke change, inspire compassion, and bind people to one another. God through Christ actively seeks relationship to us through worship.”¹

Corporate (the word means ‘body’, so I’m talking about gathering as the *body* of Christ) Worship involves much more than just hearing a sermon, although, this is a very significant part of it. As we have over 1,000 members in this church, and hundreds of “regular attenders”, the sermon time – just 20 – 25 minutes a week is, for the great majority of you, the *only* time I get to teach you together, to share the direction of this church, to encourage you, to challenge you as your pastor. I work hard at that, I hope I have something to bring you each week that is worth your time...but if you don’t show up regularly, whatever it was that God may have wanted to say to you through me or Pastor HeyYoung, will be lost. So, again, so much of the power of this time rests on your *intentionality*.

Again, Bishop Schnase says this:

The regular practice of Passionate Worship gives people an interpretive lens through which to view the world, helping them see events, relationships, and issues through God’s eyes. Among

¹ Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Robert Schanse, p. 34

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the competing interpretive contexts in which people are immersed (fierce individualism, acquisitive consumerism, intense nationalism, political partisanship, hopeless negativism, naïve optimism) worship helps people perceive themselves, their world, their relationships, and their responsibilities in ways that include God's revelation in Christ. The language of the Spirit (love, grace, joy, hope, forgiveness, compassion, justice, community) provides people the means to express interior experience and relational aspirations...The practices of worship ... rehearse connection to God and to others...²

But, that's not just referring to a sermon time. Worship is so much more than just a sermon! Reading my sermons on line, is a good thing, better than nothing, I suppose – especially for those times when you can't be present in worship due to unavoidable conflicts, i.e., sicknesses, work schedules, traveling, and so forth. But God really does work within a group of gathered people in a different way than when we are alone.

Jesus said, 'When two or three gather together in my name, I will be there among them.' Is Jesus *not* with us, when we're alone in our prayer time? Of course he is. So then, he must be referring to a *deeper* way of revealing himself that *only happens* when we are gathered together with other believers to seek him together. *That* is worship; and *passionate* worship is when we gather together in those times *expecting, knowing*, that God *will* be among us.

The style of a worship service is entirely secondary – worship styles change as cultures change, worship styles change as you travel around the world and meet Christians from different nations; worship styles vary right here – as each of our four weekly services have a distinct 'flavor'. But which ever style 'works' for you, the purpose in *all* our services is to Meet With God, to come face to face with the Holy One... to allow God access to our hearts, and minds, and our wills.

When we come expecting *that* to happen... when we come to church expecting that we *will* meet with God, the worship is passionate, and set apart from other, half-hearted attempts at following liturgies. David wrote in **Psalm 84: 2, 10**

“My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God... for a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.”

² *ibid*, p. 39

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When many people in a single congregation feel that way... the worship is *passionate*. And, even better, God honors that seeking – so the services are full of God’s presence. Not due to any perfection from our perspective. We do our best to honor God by offering good gifts in music, preaching, prayer, altar decorations, bulletins, sound quality, child care, and on and on; what makes for passionate worship is, again, the expectation that God will be among us. An expectation that is never left wanting.

Such worship, in a great celestial mystery, somehow brings us into the holy chambers of heaven itself; our limited words, and hearts are then joined with the holy and mighty angels that surround the very Throne of God... and our cries of Holy, Holy, Holy resonate not only in this room... but in heaven itself...

Revelation 5:11-13

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power,
for ever and ever!”

Passionate worship puts us in that scene... week after week. And so, once in a while we might get a bit loud...or our feet might start to move... or we’ll simply stand, quiet, and in awe of the Lamb of God who is among us as tears of joy flow... but I know God understands our hearts.

In an article for The Wall Street Journal, writer Leonard Mlodinow shares a funny story from the life of baseball great Joe DiMaggio:

It was the summer of 1945, and World War II had ended. Former soldiers, including famous baseball stars, streamed back into America and American life. Yankee slugger Joe DiMaggio was trying to be "Yankee fan Joe DiMaggio," sneaking into a mezzanine seat with his four-year-old son, Joe, Jr., before rejoining his team. A fan noticed him, then another. Soon throughout the stadium people were chanting, "Joe, Joe, Joe DiMaggio!"

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DiMaggio, moved, gazed down to see if his son had noticed the tribute. He had. "See, Daddy," said the little DiMaggio, "everybody knows me!"

I like the way Steve Farish reflects on this story in a paper he submitted to the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in 2009. He writes:

The junior Joe DiMaggio made the innocent child's mistake of assuming all the glory at the Yankee Stadium that summer afternoon in 1945 belonged to him and not to his father. Human beings, however, make a far less innocent mistake when we live as if our lives were all about us and our glory, rather than about our Heavenly Father and his glory. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:21 that the fundamental sin of the human heart involves a purposeful failure to honor God as God or to give thanks to him, that is, to give the Lord glory in the form of worship that he alone is due.

In passionate worship... we take time to recognize the One to whom alone belongs glory and honor. In worship... we forget ourselves and seek God. With a firm expectation that our seeking will surely be rewarded.

Amen.