

**Annual Meeting Sermon – 06**  
**Sharing Sacred Space: Genesis 12:1-9**

I've been thinking a lot about the Sunday worship service that we had last week. It was an eclectic joyful service in which we did things a little differently. There was arm waving, hand clapping and words via the LCD projector. These four weeks of KAIROS services focusing on the sacredness of water have been multimedia. The jubilant tenor of them has attracted some newcomers into our midst. The music led by the youth last week was joyful and uplifting. As I was standing at the pulpit observing the congregation two women caught my eye. There was one very senior lady banging her hand on the pew in time to the music. I was thinking, "You go girl." Closer to the front, there was another young adult woman, who was rolling her eyes in an expression of "Man, when is this going to be over?!" There has always been this tension between the kind of lively, joyful worship in which the Spirit is almost palpable versus a kind of service that is quieter, contemplative in which the peace of God can be felt. Which is right? Both are right; both are needed; both are types of worship that Jesus took part in and supported. Indeed, there is a third type of worship that Jesus participated in. As a faithful Jew he would have attended the symbol laden rituals of temple worship in Jerusalem.

Usually, because all of us have complex personalities that give rise to preferences, one type of worship speaks to us or suits us more than another. This is not entirely defined by which generation you belong to, although the quieter contemplative service is often enjoyed more by seniors and the joyful, break-out services are generally more appreciated by youth, young adults and families. But this is not entirely so. There is much generational cross over.

All congregations in the city, across many denominations, are working through these issues. Indeed, all congregations in Canada right now are working through these dilemmas. The bottom line is this: It comes right down to what all of our Mom's told us before we went to primary school. We have to share. We have to share this worship space and time. We can't have it all our way all the time. Now, it might seem that it is never "our" way, or at least, not often our way. Why is that? It is because irritating experiences are more marked in our memory. I'll give you an example. When we were traveling in England this January, Carl drove the car everywhere we went. I chose not to drive not trusting my ability to drive on the left hand side of the road. Since chemotherapy I have more difficulty with that kind of thing. So Carl drove and I navigated. Carl finds his way around the world by knowing where North, South, East and West is. I use a map. Now, there are roundabouts in England, about every three miles it seems. Anywhere a road crosses another one, there is a roundabout. England is very, very old. They have been building roads for 2,000 years, since the Romans were there. A map is essential. I was the navigator because Carl had enough challenges driving as wickedly fast as everyone does in England. Once, when we were trying to find our way back to London, I said "Take this exit here." He refused. In fact, we passed two signs saying we should turn if we wanted to get to London. As I pointed them out, he simply said "I don't believe them." We had passed through so many roundabouts his internal directional compass was all messed up. Eventually, I was proven to be correct. I was furious that he didn't listen to me. I do what women often do, I said, "You ALWAYS do

this. You NEVER listen to me.” He was quiet for a bit and then pointed out that in the previous two weeks we had negotiated almost a hundred of those exits and roundabouts and that this was the first time he didn’t listen to me. He pointed out that by any system of measurement 99 times out of a 100 is not bad. He was right. It left me wondering why I immediately jumped into “You ALWAYS....” mode. As human beings we do this more often than we would like to admit.

So when the worship style is irritating to us, it may seem that our needs are never considered. So, which is the correct method of worshipping God? Jesus used the metaphor of the wedding feast to describe the nature of our relationship with God. His first miracle in John is the turning of water into wine, thereby allowing the participants at a wedding to fully celebrate. In the Middle East, even today, there is no more joyful occasion. In Jesus’ day, a wedding involved a full week of partying, singing, praying and dancing. It was and is a jubilant celebration. In fact, Jesus says that this is what the kingdom of God is like. Loving and living with God is being in jubilant celebration. Sometimes a worship service is filled with so much joyful singing, movement and exclamation that the Holy Spirit is present in an almost physically palpable form. This type of service is modeled after the wedding feast.

Well, that is great for those among us who are extraverts. This would be torture for the introverts. What is there for them in the gospels? Jesus also takes his disciples to retreats in quiet spaces. These are places where prayer, scripture study and quiet teaching happen. Before any major stressful event, Jesus finds time to be in a contemplative, quiet place with his disciples, listening to the word and will of God. Before his trial and crucifixion he takes his disciples to the garden in Gethsemane where they pray. Lest we think this type of worship is all dour, we do well to recall the transfiguration of Jesus which happened on a mountain top where Jesus had retreated to worship with some of his disciples. At that time, the Spirit of God so filled Jesus that he was made luminous even as he conversed with Moses and Elijah. Worship which is contemplative, quiet and containing more solemn forms of hymns would reflect this mode.

Jesus was a faithful Jew and as such worshipped God in the huge temple in Jerusalem. He would have found familiarity and comfort within the highly symbolic, ritualized worship practiced there. An example of this type of worship in our own St. John’s congregational life would be the Ash Wednesday Healing Service. However, Jesus, the man, would be quite surprised by what we do in church. There were no churches, as such, in Jesus’ day. The concept of church, as we know it, came much later in the first century after his death. However, we would find early church methods of worship to be unfamiliar as well. Christian modes of worship have always been in a constant state of flux in order to meet the needs of the worshippers of many cultures throughout history. It is not that we change the message of God’s love through Jesus Christ; it is that we change *how* we tell the message so people can actually hear it more clearly.

The church fathers and mothers who created the rhythm and flow of the church year seem to understand that there needs to be differing styles of worship too. We just left the joyful exuberant time of the Season of Epiphany when the revealed light of the Christ of Christmas is celebrated. Now we are entering into a quieter more contemplative time of year – Lent. There will be more reflective music, challenging preaching and

serious themes. I hope those of you who are new and who have been coming because you enjoy these really “up” lively kinds of services can bear with us as we explore this other way of approaching the word of God. After Lent, Easter arrives and the celebration will be incredible. Imagine, life after death with Christ, what could be more worthy of a wedding feast type of joy?

You need to know that Ray and I take great care when we plan the services. You have to recognize how lucky you are to have a music director who still looks forward after all these years to learning, growing and keeping current with all the innovations in sacred music. He is a music director who is open to experiencing again and again the movement of the Holy Spirit in both the old and the new hymns. Together we try for balance and movement throughout the service. We practice what is called a “blended” form of worship service. We try to keep it uplifting, lively and engaging while the children are with us in the service. After they go to Sunday school we move into a more contemplative mode, ending the service with an old style, more traditional hymn and blessing.

This great adventure of being the church in this new century is much like Sarah and Abraham’s journey. We kind of thought we had it all figured out and we could just coast on our accomplishments as a church during the 50’s and 60’s of the last century. Not so. God is calling us all to journey together as God has always called worshipping, loving people throughout history. God calls us to share our stories, our thoughts and our prayers with each other in a sacred space – never an easy task. God is calling us to make room for each other in this shared worship time. Have patience, have mercy toward one another and have the faith of Abraham and Sarah.