

# Christian Ed @ 10

October 13, 2019

Good morning, and thank you to Pastor Bridget for giving me the opportunity to deliver a sermon this morning. I want to allay any fears of the Education Ministry that I have singularly rescheduled all Faith Formation Classes for the year. The title of my sermon “Christian Ed @ 10” will help us look at worship in a new way.

Last month, I attended another Lay Academy Weekend. I am in the fourth year of presumably four years. There is talk about Year 5, but I just want to complete this one. In Year 4, we are beyond the Biblical interpretation and leadership training. Now we get into the nitty gritty. What are you – that would be “me” – going to do with all this new knowledge and training? The idea is that we will develop projects and report back on their success during the year. Ultimately, how will you serve your God and the congregation?

This year, our first class focused on Faith Formation. During the summer, I volunteered to help Ed Tucker teach the older kids – sixth grade and higher. The Lay Academy class was perfectly timed! I could use all the help I could get. I expected serious theology, wrapped in psychology and just a little practical advice on how to work with youth groups. Certainly, that happened over the weekend.

In preparing for the class, we read an edited text on Faith Formation – Shaped by God: Twelve Essentials for Nurturing Faith in Children, Youth, and Adults. The sixth chapter captured my imagination – Liturgy as Faith Formation. What? I expected the text would yield little nuggets of Bible verse that would make scripture clear to kids (and me, too). I had expected a cookbook version of Bible Interpretation for youthful chefs. Here was a chapter that looked at regular Sunday worship as a seminal educational experience. After reading the chapter, I, too, was convinced that we get great lessons every week.

Of course, the sermons are wonderful. Pastors Bridget and Jon are brilliant in their interpretation and delivery. Truth be told, I have started taking notes when either of them preach. I want to remember in detail all week what I heard last Sunday. But this gets at the liturgy, the components of worship, as a lesson. Something I had taken for granted. I think most of us can confess that happens to us, too.

To be fair, the book offers twelve chapters that get into all sorts of faith formation practices. We have many of them right here at Union. We strongly endorse biblical literacy for all through various Bible study opportunities for young and old alike. One chapter deals with Christian practices in the home; another deals with gifts from people with developmental disabilities. Finally, the book concludes with faith formation in a post-modern world, with many varying viewpoints on what it means to be Christian. While I will focus on liturgy as education, we have many avenues open to us. The reading that I reference is “Liturgy for a Lifetime: Faith Formation through Worship” by Robbie Fox Castleman, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at John Brown University in Siloam (Si-LOW-um) Springs, Arkansas.

Professor Fox Castleman emphasizes three themes throughout her writing:

- Worship is all about praising God.
- God is the one calling us to worship; this is a response to a holy invitation, not just a personal initiative.
- Congregational identity, the fact that we all respond together and to each other, is the framework of worship.

Usually the liturgy follows a fairly typical order: call to worship, praise, confession, pardon, God's word and our response and the benediction. Yet during the service, all sorts of individual concerns can interrupt our worship:

- Did I turn off the ringer on my cell phone?
- Someone on Worship Ministry wonders whether we have enough bread in the trays?
- Yipes! We need four ushers for the collection; one just got called out.
- About 10:50, stomachs growl. Where should we go to lunch?

Lots of thoughts come up in worship, so it's easy to lose track of its educational value, let alone seek out new forms of worship. We also develop preferences through years of worship routine.

- We do communion in the pews. What is this intinction thing?
- How come the minister is not wearing a robe?
- We could not live without a wayward camel during the Christmas Pageant!

With all the extraneous things going on, it's easy to overlook the content of what we're doing.

For at least one hour each week we are totally committed to praising our God. We all define praise differently, yet we can agree it involves an intense intimacy with God. I've always looked upon praise as a time of pure adoration and devotion, a time of recalling all that God has done for people – far and wide, then, and now, and in the future.

Before reading this particular chapter, I had not appreciated the importance of congregation in worship. Of course, we all gather for worship. Can you imagine if we just sang hymns by ourselves? Without the choir, we probably would sound woefully lacking. We could just as easily offer individual prayers at home. But God expects more.

God called us all to come here, as a congregation. Jesus explains "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." We may be smitten with the stained-glass windows, the organ music and choir or simply meeting friends. But let's remember, it's God who called all of us to this place at this time. God reveals Godself in relationships – one with another – the people sitting in the pews. With hearing the word and study, we can make corporate sense of what we are called to do. In fact, it is all of us collectively

that give meaning to the term “God is still speaking.” All of us help define what God is saying.

Let’s look at the Liturgy itself. The Call to Worship begins the service. Lots of cues signal the beginning of worship: candles lit on the altar, the choir the introit, Pastor Bridget welcoming all in attendance, signing the friendship pads and reciting the Bond of Union – words that unite us as a congregation. We respond to God in our responsive readings. God initiates; we gladly answer. We generally sing a hymn early in the service praising God. It is the beginning of a liturgical love fest in a very real sense.

We move into the confession, a rather brief interlude. We recognize our humanness, complete with its shortcomings and failures. Yet this quickly ends as the assurance of pardon steps right in to absolve any feelings of hopelessness. In some ways, it parrots the prodigal son story. Remember the long-lost son returning home after a short-lived, but disastrous attempt at living the high life? Dad, seeing his son return home, rushes out to meet him.

“Forget the pig sty you lived in, you’re home now. Yeah, yeah – your brother is still crabby. He’ll get over it. Let’s celebrate your return!”

So it is in worship. The confession is over quickly, with assurance of pardon. God wants us to hear the Good News, not get lost in the past. That was then, this is now. God wants us to hear more.

We move into scriptural readings and the sermons (kids get one, too). Hearing the scripture as read out to the congregation assures we all hear the same thing at the same time. We may interpret it differently, but it gives us a basis of how we will respond to the Good News. It also holds the congregation accountable for its response to God. Watch who does the readings. Pastors and lay people share the readings – all are welcomed to proclaim God’s word and interpret it, including children. Recall the third point of Author Fox Castleman: Congregational identity, the fact that we all respond together and to each other, is the framework of worship.

We recognize ourselves in the stories of our ancient forebears – sibling rivalry in Cain and Abel; forgiveness in the prodigal son. The stories we hear each week apply today and into the future, simply because they represent the human story.

Sometimes our responses are immediate; other times, they are planned but occasional. The bulletin even calls out the “Response to Faith.” As a congregation, we sing hymns, praise in prayer, and offer our resources. The beauty of the offering is that all gifts are welcomed and presented together – from a “widow’s mite” through a hefty check from a wealthy member. Anything may be offered – a poem, a symbol of dedication, a plea for mercy.

In essence, we are offering our very lives to God. We offer ourselves as a congregation directly to God. From annual pledging to committing to the Love Over All Gala, we

know that we are responsible for moving Union forward. We receive no other funding but our own. Again, we simply respond to God's love of us first.

Baptism and communion, though less frequent, provide a way for the congregation to respond yet again. We celebrate the baptism of a new member; more importantly, we commit to joining God in raising the child (or adult) in the faith. Recall our words as Pastor Bridget asks the congregation to support newly baptized: "We promise our love, support, and care." Our words demand more than just ritual response.

We also join God at the feast of communion, again as a congregation. Communion unites us with God universally and cosmically. Universally, with people throughout the world; cosmically, throughout time – past, present, and future. Through it all, we focus on God.

Worship concludes with a benediction. As we have heard God's word anew, we bless the God who loves us. God in turn then blesses us with a commission to continue responding in our daily lives, whether that be in prayer and/or good works.

The liturgy even adapts well to daily life. Waking with a word of praise for safekeeping through the night, recalling or reading God's Word early in the morning, recognizing the temptations we each face daily, praising God at bedtime for the love and presence upon which we rely.

I want to thank all of you for the gift of Lay Academy. As a congregation you have supported me in this quest. Now I have shared just a small part of what I have learned and loved about the program. The Wisconsin Conference of the UCC offers many programs for seekers. Lay Academy is one; the Damascus Project is another which offers online and flexible options. Ask Pastor Bridget or me about these options.

For now, let us resume our worship or "Christian Ed @ 10."

Lou Ann Norsetter  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7; Luke 17:11-19**  
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