

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY

Fourth Sunday After Epiphany - February 1, 2004

Communion Sunday

Anne G. Cohen

Luke 4:16-30

For Our Reflection:

All religion is an attempt to express. what is essentially inexpressible. Every new religion has to create its own language.

- Leo Baeck Essence of Judaism (1936)

The perpetual danger which besets religion is that it may substitute gentility and aestheticism for prophetic insight and power.

- Georgia Harkness The Resources of Religion (1936)

R.F.L. (Religion as a Foreign Language)

Every Jewish prayer of blessing begins with these words:

BARUCH ATTAH ADONAI
ELOHENU MELECH HA O'LAM

Blessed are You, O God
(Lord, King) Ruler of the Universe (Traditional translations)

Holy One of Blessing
Your Presence fills Creation (Kushner, The Book of Words p.21)

The prayer that Jesus taught to the Disciples was in Aramaic and began:

Abba, our Papa in the Heavens
Blessed be Your Name

Papa, Your Presence fills Creation
Your Name is Blessing

From Hebrew to Aramaic to English - the same prayer has become Our Common Prayer - brought closer to the heart by the use of Abba rather than Adonai (Lord) or Melech (King).

We can say that Judeo-Christian-Islamic religion has evolved into modern forms. But in reality we have been doing the same things for thousands of years - just using different languages - and different interpretations of those languages.

We might say, "Well - we don't make blood sacrifices in Temple any more..." But what would

we call the gifts of pledges, tithes, building campaign donations - something of worth earned through our blood, sweat and tears - offered to God on the altar? Same deal, different language.

We call what we do on Sunday mornings or on Ash Wednesday evenings or on Christmas Eve: WORSHIP

What do we mean when we say we come to church TO WORSHIP or FOR WORSHIP?

The word WORSHIP comes from two (or possibly three) OLD ENGLISH words.:

WEORTH meaning "worth"

SCIPE meaning "quality, condition or state"

SCIP meaning "to cut"

In MODERN ENGLISH (New World Dictionary)

WORTH is a word indicating "honor or quality. It implies intrinsic excellence resulting from superior moral, cultural or spiritual qualities." To be worthy of honor - one must embody superior INTRINSIC qualities. We usually view God as a Being with Superior Intrinsic Qualities - worthy of honor. We also strive to have these qualities within ourselves. And we engage in activities that may enhance our own worth in the eyes of God. These are pieces of the meaning of the word WORSHIP.

SCIPE (with the "e") or SHIP - carries numerous meanings into our day. It indicates a quality, condition or state (fellowship, friendship). It designates rank or office (kingship, governorship) or the person holding that office (lordship). It points to an ability or skill (leadership). And it refers collectively to a specific class of individuals (readership, citizenship).

SCIPE is also the base of the O.E. word SCIEPPAN meaning to create or shape.

SCIP (without the "e") - meaning "to cut" - also became our word SHIP - a vessel that cuts through water.

So the word WEORTHSCIPE or WORSHIP has multiple meanings - with an emphasis on "being a vessel for" or "designating that which is " worthy of honor,that which is intrinsically superior - not ordinary or base. A nuance might be the act of "creating" or "shaping" something that is of worth, intrinsically a blessing.

BARUCH ATTAH ADONAI
ELOHENU MELECH HA O'LAM

We heard a story this morning about Jesus - who experienced an adult baptism from his cousin John in the Jordan River, heard God's claim upon him, spent 40 days in the wilderness battling his own demons, and then went home to teach in the synagogues of the region of Galilee.

One random Sabbath day he was in his home town of Nazareth and, being a man of tradition, went to his home synagogue. He had already achieved a reputation - first as the well-thought-of son of Joseph the carpenter - and then, again, as a local celebrity for his acts of miraculous healing in the region. Carpenter's son becomes wise teacher and healer, makes good, visits the old neighborhood.

Jesus was treated as an honored guest and asked to read scripture. He was handed the scroll of the Torah containing Isaiah, selected his passage and read it aloud in Hebrew. Nazareth is a town in an area surrounded by numerous foreign territories and cultures, intersected by trade routes and within easy travel distance from cities. Those cities were hotbeds of politics, theatre, commerce and a high paced exchange of ideas in multiple languages. So it is likely that the population of Nazareth spoke and/or understood Greek - as well as the local language of Aramaic - not to mention the Hebrew of their sacred texts.

So Jesus read from Torah in Hebrew. Then he sat down to teach, as was the custom. And he may have made his commentary in Greek or Aramaic, but whatever it was, coming from the mouth of Joseph's son, it seemed like a foreign language to the congregation.

Jesus could have sat there and received the admiration of his parents' friends. He could have said a few things about how worthy they were to be in the presence of God as God declares the Jubilee Year – restoration for THEM.

But he didn't. He used a proverb popular in Greek and Jewish lore of the time. "Without a doubt, you will say to me - 'Doctor, heal yourself.'" You will ask me to do for friends and family the things I've been doing for strangers.

But, you know, back when Elijah and Elisha were prophesying about God's unhappiness with Israel, their promises of restoration and healing were delivered to outsiders. Hear what I'm saying, folks. Once again, God does not find the elite of Israel worthy of salvaging. So God's Jubilee, God's Restoration is coming to those who ARE worthy – the outcasts, the widows and lepers and foreigners and repentant enemy collaborators.

Jesus was not NICE to these people who had helped to raise him, who were ready to honor him and his nice teachings. He was not a NICE person. He was a wise young man, a prophetic person, an HONEST person. And to those of us who attend church to hear how worthy we are of God's blessings, such HONESTY is like being insulted in a foreign language. We get the undertone of menace without understanding the message.

So OF COURSE the congregation dragged him off his chair, out the door and dangled him over the fiery pits of hell (or a local cliff which was handy) for being so disrespectful. Unaware of their own complicity with power, the wrongfulness of their own participation in shunning the weak and poor and young and old and foreign and impure... Aware only of the OWN sense of "victim-ship" at the hands of Romans and unethical business owners... Jesus' message was totally Greek (or English) to them. They intuited only that they were being insulted and reacted. They didn't hear the deeper message - that they were being invited to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. They were being invited to BE a blessing rather than EXPECT a blessing.

They were being invited to learn the language of the God they professed to worship - the language of the poor, the outsider, the shunned. Because until they learned God's language, God's intrinsic goodness and superior ethical judgment would be foreign to them. And they

would end up throwing God over a cliff instead of working together to expand their own intrinsic goodness.

Without knowing each other's language, it is impossible to work together. Consider the popular accounting from Islamic scripture, which tells the story of four men, each with a bit of money (a DI-RAM). They had to pool their resources in order to have enough to purchase something to eat. A fight broke out among them as to what to buy. The Persian said he wanted ANGUR. The Arab disagreed, insisting they buy INAB. The Turk clamored for UZUM. And the Greek would settle for nothing except ISTAFIL. They got into a bloody brawl, and all went hungry that night. The sad thing was, all four words meant GRAPES.

(Lois Kellerman, Marriage from the Heart p.208)

God, may we learn Your language so that when the stranger brings messages from You, we will refrain from hurling them from a cliff and listen more carefully to the intent of the messenger - the blessing that is being given.

BARUCH ATTAH ADONAI
ELOHENU MELECH HA O'LAM

Holy One of Blessing
Your Presence fills Creation
Your will be done through us
May we find our worth in exhibiting the qualities we honor in you
May we be to others the blessing you are to us
Amen and Blessed Be

Bulletin

WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship The Spirit of the Lord CSB # 67

+ Opening Hymn How Can We Name a Love? CSB # 84

+ Opening Prayer (unison)

O Holy One, I hear and say so many words,
yet yours is the word I need.

Speak now, and help me listen;

and, if what I hear is silence, let it quiet me,

let it disturb me, let it touch my need,

let it break my pride, let it shrink my certainties,

let it enlarge my wonder.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)
Creator God who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the kingdom and the power
And the glory forever. Amen.

Commissioning of Joan Thompson and John Paton
+ Congregational Response (unison)

We gather in celebration of the joy that is ours to be partners with you in the service of the Holy.
We promise to love you, honor your calling in the world, pray for you in your absence, hold you
in our hearts and continue our work in this place that together we may be a faithful and Spirit-
filled Community of God.

We Offer Our Gifts to Further Our Ministry
Super Bowl of Caring for Samaritan Center
Offertory
Prayer of Dedication (unison)

May our gifts flow easily from our hands because we accept compassion and sharing as
appropriate to the life of faith. May our gifts flow easily from us because we identify with
Christ's gracious and supportive ministry to others. May gifts flow easily from us because the
Spirit of God desires to heal the world and repair its brokenness through our work, even now,
even here. Amen.

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

Just Peace Moment

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Gospels Luke 4:16-30

Quartet The Eyes of All Wait Upon Thee by Jean Berger

Meditation R.F.L. (Religion as a Foreign Language)

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Celebration of Holy Communion

+ Welcome to the Table I Come With Joy Hymnal #349

Invitation

Sharing the Bread and the Cup

Communion will be served to you as you remain seated. Please wait until all have been served before eating the bread - and again before drinking the cup - to signify our unity with one another and with all who eat and drink at God's table this day.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (in unison)

We affirm the goodness of life and the openness of the future because our God is a God of life and love. As God comes to us in this act of communion, so let us go out to others in acts which bring healing, reconciliation and hope to our world. Amen.

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God Hymnal #743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

+ Sending Hymn Here I Am Lord CSB # 35

+ Commissioning (unison)

May the great Ruler of all high places, God of many names, touch you with a wind that keeps you strong for all the days to come. Amen.

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle)

Song from Ghana

+ Postlude

WORSHIP NOTES

Opening Prayer is by Ted Loder Guerrillas of Grace (p.25)

Commissioning is from the Book of Worship, United Church of Christ(p.553)