

“Welcome to Language School”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “GETTING BACK TO THE HEART OF WORSHIP”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Psalm 149

¹ Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

² Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.

³ Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

⁴ For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory.

⁵ Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches.

Language is a funny thing. It is how we communicate, yet it is also sometimes the very thing that makes communication difficult. If someone is talking a different language, how are we going to understand them? If you're American and you are in a foreign country you just talk louder, right? Isn't that the cliché about us when we travel to other countries?

But you can be speaking the same language and still not understand each other. Do you remember “ebonics” movement a few years back? The purpose was to establish common African-American colloquialisms as acceptable English grammar. I think it kind of worked better than we think because it seems to me a lot of that is in our common vocabulary now. But you probably haven't heard of “Hebonics.”

“Hebonics” is the creation of a writer named Schollman, who created a textbook, “Switched on Hebonics.” It is a tongue-in-cheek look at common Yiddish or Hebrew ways of talking. He

says for example, “In Hebonics, the response to any question is usually another question -- plus a complaint that is implied or stated. Thus, ‘How are you?’ may be answered, How should I be, with my feet?”

Question: “What time is it?”

English answer: “Sorry, I don't know.”

Hebonic answer: “What am I, a clock?”

Remark: “I hope things turn out okay.”

English response: “Thanks.”

Hebonic response: “I should BE so lucky!”

Remark: “Hurry up. Dinner's ready.”

English response: “Be right there.”

Hebonic response: “Alright already, I'm coming. What's with the ‘hurry’ business? Is there a fire?”

Now in church we have our own language. Maybe we should call it “Je-phonics,” as in “Jesus-phonics.” I don't know if they help us communicate or not. You tell me – do you know where the nave and the narthex are? Can you tell your doxology from your gloria

patri? And we have our hymns but not our “hymns.” We also have “liturgists” but I don’t “sermon.” I message. But I don’t “text” message very well. We have changed some of the language in our bulletin to make it understandable to someone who maybe isn’t “churched,” who isn’t familiar with such language. That is a value call. Is it more important to keep “church-y” language that we are familiar with and expect newcomers to learn and adapt, or is it more important to make the language more secular so that newcomers will feel comfortable and understand what’s going on?

Now being that this is Jacksonville, a Navy town, I would be remiss not to point out that the church isn’t the only institution with its own set of words for things. Don’t go “aboard” ship and call port “left” or starboard “right.” You better go to the bow of the ship not the front or to the stern not the back. But my favorite part of the ship is the “scuttlebutt,” though I don’t know exactly where it is.

So language is the tool we need to communicate, but it can be an unwieldy, difficult, cumbersome tool. Some of you have noticed that we have tried to reduce the “insider” religious language in our bulletin. We call them songs not hymns. We call it a message not a sermon. But we still have an offertory and a narthex and a liturgist.

The Calvin Institute for Christian Worship says that one of its ten core convictions about worship is that worship is “language school.”

John Witvliet, the director of the Calvin Institute, explains it this way. He says, as a parent we want our children to know how to say “please,” and “thank you.” We want them to be able to say, “I’m sorry,” and “forgive me.” We especially want them to be able to say, “I love you.” These are learned things. Children learn them from us and it takes repetition. We have to teach them when they are appropriate and when they aren’t. But they don’t learn this without us modeling it. He says there are two approaches to parenting in this vein. We can wait for them to learn to say them on their own, but most of us are like this – when a child asks for dessert we say, “Say ‘please.’” When we give it to them we say, “Say, ‘thank you.’” When they come running to us because sister or brother hit them we sit them down and teach them to say, “I’m sorry, please forgive me.” And we say, “I love you,” and we keep saying it so that they will know it is true and in this particular instance we don’t usually tell them to say it back, but we wait with hopeful hearts for them to say it to us on their own.

He makes the point that this is really part of what worship is about as language school. It teaches us and reminds us to keep saying to God, “please,” and “thank you.” Worship is the opportunity for the Christian community to come together and say in public to God, “I am sorry, please forgive me.” One of the things several of the texts we are reading for the worship grant say about worship is the importance of a prayer of confession and

the appropriate “absolution,” or “assurance of pardon,” as some traditions call it. We don’t do that regularly here. I expect we will try to include that more regularly in future services. He points out that it isn’t that every one of us have committed every sin that might be expressed in that particular week, but that we are in this together, no person’s sin is a thing apart from anyone else. It is also a way to teach us the importance of being able to say, “I am sorry, please forgive me,” to God. These elements are important in any relationship. They are a significant part of the way we express our relationship.

So part of worship is training ourselves about how to relate to God. Worship is an expression of our relationship with God. If you worship someone like your spouse then you want to spend time in his/her presence. You want to express yourself to your beloved. You want to let them know you adore them and appreciate them. If you have wronged her you better send flowers, er-make amends, right? If you are mad with him he better say I’m sorry, please forgive me, I’ll never do it again, honey, I am a worthless dog not worthy to untie the shoes of a goddess like you! Or something like that, right? Worship is an expression of our relationship with our beloved, whether that is a spouse or God.

So if worship is language school does that mean we have to learn to talk about naves and narthexes and use thee’s and thou’s? Is the language really what is important and does the preacher have to pray in his “special God voice” for a

prayer to be real or for God to hear? Of course, not. But worship as language school is a way of saying that what we do in worship is the intentional expression of ways God calls us into relationship.

The Calvin Institute suggests that this is based on a “deep engagement with Scripture.” I believe this is true, but it is also not without drama of a sort. I was reading this past week that they are re-editing the NIV Bible. The mostly conservative/evangelical readers are worried that they will give in too much and make the language “too inclusive.” Those who are KJV – based fundamentalists already believe the NIV is too liberal. In fact, a few weeks ago we had a visitor in worship who accosted me after church [in a nice way] to tell me that every version of the Bible since the writing of the KJV was “of the devil,” and he had the books that proved it. Now I knew I wasn’t going to get far with KJV – guy but I did try to explain to him about those changes. I tried to tell him that the writers of the RSV had made changes based on manuscripts that had been found since the writing of the King James Version. Those manuscripts were older and there were more of them that attested to the change than the manuscripts used by the translators who wrote the King James Version. He, of course, was not going to be swayed but that is just one example of the challenges of language in relation to Scripture.

I believe in deep engagement with Scripture. I don’t believe in Biblical literalism or in Biblical inerrancy or in making the Bible an idol, a false god that

we worship because we think it has to be perfect or somehow that makes God less than perfect. I believe in fact that deep engagement of Scripture demands that one put aside literal or so-called “inerrant” readings of the Bible. If worship is truly to be language school then we ought to be willing to learn that God may not speak in ways we expect, by the means we expect, with the word that we expect.

The Psalm calls us to “be glad in our Maker,” and to “rejoice in the King.” It invites us to use dancing and melody and to sing for joy. The Calvin Institute speaks of the use of “disciplined creativity of art” in worship. What they mean is that it is appropriate to incorporate varieties of art in worship. The context is that it is about art for the sake of expressing our relationship to God, not just art for arts sake. So for example, we include music in our worship, but we don’t just include any music. It has a focus on God, it is an expression of worship. It is an artist using the gifts that God has given him or her to share with others, so that it might cause others to give thanks and praise to God. One of the things we are doing is inviting the children, as they explore the meaning of worship, to create different works of art to share with us to show what they are learning. But even more, we want to “commission” you, our artists in residence, to create art that you feel expresses something about worship. If you are a painter, paint something that talks about what you experience in worship. If you are a person who works with textiles, create a banner or

something that is an expression of your relationship with God. If you are a musician create a song that expresses praise for God. If you are a photographer or a videographer or a dancer or an actress or a poet or writer, we want you to share your “offering” with us. We will put those up in the “narthex” or here in the “sanctuary” or in “fellowship” hall, or as Dave Wenzel calls it “friendship” hall. Then we want you to share during our mission moments what it is about, or write something that we can include in the bulletin if you are too shy to speak in public about your artistic effort.

Worship invites us to engage Scripture deeply and to experience artistic expressions that move our spirits into deeper relationship with God. As we think about what we do and why, let us remember the most important language we can use in relation to worship. The most important language is what question we ask about worship. We should not be asking whether the way we do worship satisfies *me* or makes *me* comfortable or is *my* “style.” We should ask if we are doing it because it satisfies God, and if we are doing it because God is praised? We should maybe even ask if we truly think it is God’s style, as if God has only one style to be worshiped. The test is whether it helps us and others learn to say “please,” and “thank you” and “I’m sorry,” and “forgive me,” to God. Then we will qualify as good students in the language school of worship. AMEN.