

“How Worship Transforms”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

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

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

September 13, 2009

Psalm 146 [NRSV]

¹Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

²I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

³Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.

⁵Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God,

⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever;

⁷who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free; ⁸the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous.

⁹The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord!

Have you ever thought about how you would transform the world if you had the power?

Have you ever wished you had the power to change it? I like the bumper sticker I saw once that said, “If I had been present at the creation of the world I would have made several helpful suggestions.” Is there any doubt that we live in world desperately in need of transformation?

The world tries to pound us into conformity to its values of violence, injustice, power politics, and economic apartheid. The media fuels a lot of this by focusing on the voices that separate us and anger us, and with images of loveless sex, outrageous violence, and mind-boggling material excesses. Faith has always been about choosing whether to allow the idols and false gods of the world rule our lives or choosing a

different God. You could say the choice is “conform or transform.”

The Apostle Paul tells us we should not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The world is constantly trying to conform us to its values of violence and injustice. Gemechis Buba describes his world and although he is talking about East Africa, I think it is just as true here on the east coast of Florida. He says, “Terms such as peace, love, honor, stability, relationships, and care are very catchy to someone like me. They are catchy to someone born and brought up in a country where peaceful relationship is a rarity. Given its political history, east Africa and its adjacent region of the Middle East are known throughout the history of humanity by unstable systems of governance.”

He says, “I was born and brought up in a country called Ethiopia in the eastern part of Africa.... One fact stands out very clearly: This country has never seen a single day without war until today. War has been the national trademark, part of the national news, and it is always included in daily talks on the streets of the nation. Hatred breeds hatred, bloodshed breeds bloodshed, violence produces violence and injustice begets misery and lawlessness.”

He goes on to say, “When children are born and brought up in such a place, they tend to believe that this is just something to be seen as a viable option and as a normal pattern of relationship for people to engage in. Violence seems to be a way to go.... This is the way I was brought up into mature manhood. ... My thinking, reflections, opinion, and reaction to different circumstances are derived from things in my background that provided the holistic fibers by which I was wired.

Rev. Buba adds, “Today millions of children ... are being brought up into becoming mature men and women under the direct influence of cultures of violence and dysfunctional social structures.” The result is people naturally look at “violence as a viable means of resolving differences.” Rev. Buba may be describing his own experience of East Africa but I don’t think it is far off from the experience of many in every corner of the globe and even right here in “River City.”

How is it possible to transform a world so saturated in violence and injustice? I want to suggest to you that

what you are doing here this morning is in fact, the very key to transforming the world. I want to suggest to you that worship is a radical, life-and-world transforming act, because worship is about the only place that can truly allow us to imagine a different world, a different reality. The rest is daydreaming or wistful fantasies. Worship not only points to a different world it embodies it. Worship not only talks about a different reality it creates it. Worship is not just entertainment for the religious or spiritual exhortation of the religious. It is the articulation of “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

When we sit here side by side and share in a moment of reflection on the power and love of God instead of the love of money and the power of a particular political party we are envisioning a different world. When we pass a tray of bread cubes and tiny cups of grape juice or wine, we embody a different world. When we pray that God enters into our human affairs and changes us we invite God to transform us, and the world around us. That is, in worship we become the living presence of what Jesus called “the Kingdom of God.” That is a very different Kingdom than any human creation, whether that human kingdom is a democracy, a dictatorship, or a socialist state.

One of the ways worship creates possibilities of transformation is when we seek to open the doors to those who are different from us. The Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, among its “Ten Core Convictions” about worship lists the belief that worship should be trans-

cultural, counter-cultural, and cross-cultural. In short it should include people from a variety of cultural experiences and it should also critique the cultures of the world, because none of them fulfill God's call to "let thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That is another reason we say up front in our worship service, "No matter who you are or where you are in your journey of life you are welcome here." That is the promise that we don't exclude based on cultural classifications or other human boundaries. We have intentionally chosen to be open to God's call to be transformed rather than conform to the world's values.

But let me be clear about this transformation. It doesn't happen by the manner or in the fashion you and I probably think of. Rev. Buba makes this clear when he reminds us that, "The kingdom of God is built and maintained by love. This message is the only hope and remedy for the sick soul and for the infected conscience of humanity as a whole. In our going out and coming in, if we are Christians, this message of love is ringing very loudly and audibly for us to remember and practice it. In history, great empires come and go. Great leaders rise and fall. Wealth, power and fame and might are proven to be transient in nature. There is no permanency in their nature. The only power that is proven to be permanent is the power of love. 1 Corinthians 13 declares this clearly, stating, 'Love never fails.'"¹

¹ "Kingdom Built by Love," the Rev. Gemechis Desta Buba, *Day 1*, 2003.

This is a very different world, governed by a very different ruler and power than the world we spend most of our lives in. Rev. David Lose makes this point when he talks about Peter. Peter is the one who declares that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God, but when Jesus says he must suffer and die, Peter rebukes him. Rev. Lose says, "Peter wants a strong God." He wants someone who will defeat Israel's enemies, restore their political prestige and power – in short he is thinking like we think when we think about transforming the world. Rev. Lost says, "and who can blame him? Are we any different? When the crushing weight of hardship bears down upon us, when the voices of despair drown out all others, when it's one disappointment after another, don't we also want a strong God to avenge our hurts, to right all wrongs, and to put us back on top of things?"

"Except...except that it's precisely when I'm down and out, when life's setbacks and disappointments have conspired to make me feel like I'm nothing, that I wonder what a God of might, strength, and justice--the God of winners, that is--has to say to me, an ordinary schmuck and everyday Joe, who often feels far closer to defeat than to victory.

In response to Peter Jesus says, you are thinking like men and not like God. Rev. Lose, adds, "I think this is what Jesus means in his rebuke to Peter by contrasting divine things and earthly ones. By our human reckoning strength is everything, might makes right, and the one who dies with the most toys wins.

But God employs a different calculus and measures strength not in terms of might but of love, not by victory but vulnerability, not in possessions but in sacrifice, not by glory but by the cross.”

Rev. Lose points out that Peter experiences yet another world-transforming moment. After he has denied he even knew Jesus he encounters Christ resurrected. In that moment he experiences mercy –forgiveness – he doesn’t deserve. Christ forgives his denial and calls him to be something more than he has been, to be transformed and to transform the world, but not by power and strength. He calls him to embody this love and mercy that Christ has shown him.

We think the world is transformed by human definitions of power. God transforms the world in ways that defy human definitions. You and I and Peter don’t get the God we want – the strong God who strikes with lightning and thunder. But what we get is the God we need. We get the God who speaks silently, moves invisibly in the human heart and then reveals himself in places we wouldn’t be caught dead.

Rev. Lose says, “So it will also be with us, as we recognize that the God we worship comes not for the victorious but for the vanquished and seeks out not the mighty but the down trodden. Our God comes, as Scripture bears witness, to feed the hungry, to heal the lame, to free the bound and to bind up the broken-

heartened. Our God comes, that is, for us.”²

You want to transform the world, do you? Then do what the Psalmist says:

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Praise the Lord, O my soul!

²I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God
all my life long.

³Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴When their breath departs,
they return to the earth;
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⁵Happy are those
whose help is the God of Jacob,
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The Lord sets the prisoners free;

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The Lord lifts up
those who are bowed down;
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⁹The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked
he brings to ruin.

¹⁰The Lord will reign forever, your God,
O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the Lord!

May our worship continue to transform us
and the world in which we live. AMEN.

² "The Heartbreaking Messiah," the Rev. Dr. David Lose, *Day 1*, 2009.