

July 12, 2014
2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 12b-19
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“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight O God, our rock and our salvation.”

Last Sunday we worshipped with our neighbors at the third annual ecumenical worship service, this time at Magnolia Presbyterian Church. There was a lovely spirit in the air as people began arriving, greeting one another and filling the pews. It was meaningful to be with my colleagues from the other churches, having just met Pastor Carla, the Christian Education priest at Ascension and Pastor Sia, the brand new pastor at Magnolia United Methodist – it was a special joy to join with them as well.

I want to share with you some of my first impressions of Pastor Sia who is originally from Tonga. She entered Magnolia Presbyterian last Sunday, meeting us for the very first time and was sincerely engaging and warm. I noticed right away a light that seemed to shine from the very center of her essence.

And then when the clergy group gathered for coffee this past week to talk about the service, there that light was again.

Right off the bat she told us this marvelous story:

She has moved into the parsonage right next to the church on 34th, which is just across the street from the man’s home that has all the political signs plastering the front of his driveway. His driveway kind of stands out in Magnolia – doesn’t it? Such boldness is not common here! Pastor Sia told us that she had been keeping her eyes open for a time when the homeowner would be outside so she could speak with him. As soon as she saw him, she ceased the moment, went across the street and warmly greeted him and said how beautiful his signs were! She said he was a bit taken aback – but a smile, slowly came across his face. She told him that she was his new neighbor, Sia, and reached out to shake his hand. “Oh”, he said, “are you the caretaker?” “Yes”, she said. “I am the caretaker of the house and the church next door – I am the new pastor there.” “Oh!” He said. He told her she could get signs too –but she said, no – she said, you are the homeowner, you can do that – I am just the caretaker – so I can’t do that. Pastor Sia asked him his name – “Price”, he said.

And then she told him, if there is anything he ever needs, don’t hesitate to walk right over and knock on her door any time.

Then she gave him a hug, and he smiled again.

Pastor Sia then told us that next time she is cooking up something tasty, she and her granddaughter will walk a plate over to him.

Simply beautiful, isn't it?

While her neighbor is bold in his politicking – Pastor Sia is bold in her neighborliness – in the sharing of light and joy. And from the little I know about her – I sense that this light flows from the love she has for God, and from God.

Sia's boldness and loving essence, got me thinking about my own spirit and essence as a pastor and a person.

It got me thinking about the differences between white-European and Pacific Islander worship **and** neighborly styles!

And...

It got me thinking about the reading in 2 Samuel when King David dances so freely – and some scholars believe, almost nakedly – before the ark of God as it is moved from its temporary home, into the City of David. It is an image of such gleeful happiness and praise.

Some would say it was undignified. In fact if you read further in the passage you will find that David's wife is not happy about his dancing at all.

Since the lectionary readings have focused on King David this summer, I find that part of what I like about him is how he brings his whole self to whatever he is doing.

Since when did dignity become more important than expressing passion or joy in worship?

Kate Matthews, UCC Dean of the Amistad Chapel in Cleveland writes:

“Have we tamed the gospel? How passionate is our worship, how exuberant our praise, how deep our awe at what God is doing in our lives and in the life of the world? Do we really know what it feels like to rejoice “with all our might” because God is present in our lives? Have we ever felt so full of exultation about Who God is that we want to dance without inhibition, right in front of our family, our friends, and our community?”

Author Barbara Ehrenreich found that pews in churches are a late architectural innovation added in the Middle Ages to inhibit the dancing that apparently broke out from time to time. Straight lines, orderly rows, military conformity – suited the civilized state better than spontaneous outbreaks of collective joy. But, she writes, rigid conformity and emotional inhibition stultify the human spirit. (Pg. 65 Naked Spirituality by Brian McLaren)

Now don't get worried that Scott and I are going to suggest we get rid of the pews!! But it is interesting to consider their background, isn't it?

I expect most of us think about them as being a place to rest, rather than a way to control any possible outbreaks of joy or dancing!

This got me asking the question, how much has our Anglo-European ancestry stifled the freedom to bring our whole selves to worship --- and for that matter --- our whole selves to our daily lives?

And, how much has our ancestry stifled a sense of being in a relationship **with a God of joy – of passion – of praise – of love, and not judgment and stifling control, in the first place?**

(Nothing wrong with our ancestry --- just wondering if we might need to shake it up now and then!)

Another thoughtful tidbit of information I came across this week was from a book by Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman called How God Changes Your Brain. I have not read the book, but I did read an interesting summation of their findings which was written by Michael Gerson, in a piece of the summation he writes:

“Contemplating a loving God strengthens portions of our brain – particularly the frontal lobes and the anterior cingulate – where empathy and reason reside.

Contemplating a wrathful God empowers the limbic system, which is “filled with aggression and fear.” **It is a sobering concept: The God we choose to love changes us into his image, whether he exists or not.”**

Wow – isn’t that thought-provoking!

The God we choose to love changes us into his/her image, whether he/she, exists or not...

MUCC most certainly does not worship a wrathful, judgmental God, though I know from conversations that some of us grew up with that image of God, and it is difficult to shake it from our brains when we were taught at a young age.

My prayer is that while we worship, contemplate, and seek a loving God ---may we come to love and trust in a God – a Spirit – a Higher Power --- that values the bringing of our whole selves to the table of worship and to our relationships. Our joys, our sorrows, our needs, our doubts, our mistakes and regrets; our wants and our dreams --- all are gathered up into the embrace of a Loving Giver and Guardian.

For myself, I realize that as a product of my white-Anglo-Saxon-protestant background --- I am drawn to the dancing David and the spirit of Pastor Sia because I want and need to tap **more** regularly into the well of joy and hope that is poured out to us from God, no matter our circumstance. It is important to not only see what is wrong with our world or what the church could do better --- I need to dance and laugh and sing --- at least a little –in celebration of the gift of God’s Love.

I have a hunch I am not alone because...

We are a heady people – and while this is important and helpful, it can surely make us into a very serious people.

There is a lot of suffering and struggle in our world – that can make us a worrying or fearful people ---

We bear the wounds of disappointments in our lives, loss, and illness – these can make us into a despairing people.

We while we must bring all of this to the table of worship and to our relationships with one another ----

What about uncorking **the joy, the gratitude, the praise, the wonder, the awe, the alleluiah's, that can sustain us and prompt us to WANT to share the love with others?**

This morning I would like to read to you a piece on the word “Joy” written by the wonderful poet, David Whyte in his book called Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words. As I read along, I invite you to shout out an “Amen!” or a “Yes!” When you hear a joy that rings true for you: (read the piece here)

May Magnolia UCC uncork the joy that prompts us to move out of the pew – to extend a hand to the stranger – to pet the dog that is strolling by – to sing in the shower – to speak out a word of gratitude – to be joyously undignified because in light of the most amazing grace that upholds all creation...

sometimes it is simply the right thing to do.