



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

The Power of Worship

January 27, 2019

Text: Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6—All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen’, lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Sermon: Like the Israelites in this story, we ourselves had only briefly settled in, acclimating to the buildings and spaces that would become our homes. Boxes still littered the floors of my tiny, monastic apartment; textbooks had not yet found their way on the shelf, and pictures still leaned up against the walls. The professors had only just opened their offices, even though last year’s schedule still hung on their door. It was the twenty-seventh day of the eighth month; it was holy day, and it was on that day that all the people of Yale Divinity School gathered together in Marquand Chapel. And it was only then that things really got started. Maybe it was Siobhan, the Dean of the Chapel, who had a deep Irish brogue and who projected both compassion and confidence, power as well as possibility. Then again, maybe it was Patrick Evan, the music leader, who simply strolled into the middle of the circle holding an African gourd laced with beads and started playing. He simply opened his mouth to sing while opening his arms to invite us in. Then again, maybe it was that forty-something African American woman who spent the entire service with her arms raised in the air saying, ‘Amen.’ Or maybe it was that twenty something young man from the plains who spent the entire service with his head bowed down, clearly thinking and praying. Maybe it was the amazing sound of great voices lifted in hymn or the utter silence of reflection and prayer. Maybe it was the stately, enduring elegance of the chapel that had long stood, or maybe it was the layout, with pews gone and instead with the chairs all facing in toward one another. But most of all, I think it was the wide eyes of all of us newbies, trying to take in the scene unfolding before us. But what was clear without a doubt was that in that moment we were creating something new—something critically important—that would be the center of our lives and of our lives together.

Worship at Yale Divinity School was at the heart of our shared experience, just like it was for the Israelites back in the day of Nehemiah. Over the course of that year, we would grow deeper and deeper in shared worship until we newbies also spoke with the compassion and confidence of Siobhan, even if we lacked her poetic brogue. By the end of the year, if Patrick simply started the line of a hymn, without music or hymnals we would all finish it together. It would be at the end of the year that that 40 year old African American woman would have her head down praying while that twenty-something young man would have his hands up waving in the air. It would be at the end of the year that the silence would have grown longer and deeper. That is, until summer came and we all left, only to repeat the whole process the next year, settling in and finding the center of our lives in worship all over again in profoundly different ways. There is no question that academic learning took up most of our time there at the quad at YDS. The classrooms and library, the sections and study groups occupied the biggest part of the plot, but there is no question that that worship in the middle of the class day was the center of our lives. We would eventually settle in in Marquand Chapel and it would be to Marquand Chapel where we would head to handle the joys and difficulties of grad school and the world that refused to stop while we studied. It would be Marquand Chapel that would give us the faith and courage to go out humbly and serve. Perhaps that is why Marquand Chapel was placed architecturally and visually at the heart of the buildings in the quad, bridging library and lecture hall on one side and the common room and eating space of the other—worship was at the heart of our lives.

In Nehemiah the people had just settled back in after a long and painful exile. Their future was still far from certain, but Nehemiah tells us that all the people came and gathered—wide-eyed newbies all of them. They came out from home and hearth to find a new beginning, and this reading marks the beginning of worship for people in post-exilic times. Nehemiah says that all the people came. For all the people are needed whenever something as transformative and real as worship is dared. In worship, we need the full gifts of the people; we need arms raised and heads lowered, and everything in between. We need the fullness of life if we are to be the full body of the one we follow. It is, I will confess to you, why I yearn for all of us to come together each week—not only for its potential for you, but instead because of its potential for all of us.

This passage doesn't just bring up the *all*, it dwells on it. It is not content simply to name it but to bring the fullness of that word *all* to life. They came before the water gate, it says. As the source of life, water gave the way in, but more than that, the water gate was the place in Jerusalem where all could literally gather. The impure among them were restricted from some places within the temple. But the water gate was a mixing place—a place where the holy and the unholy could gather, so that the holy might enter in. It is why we start each of our worship services with that wide welcome to make sure that you hear not just that you are welcome but that as a church we remember that it is an ongoing task to remind and make space for everyone, literally everyone to feel at home here.

Nehemiah says that the holy teachings—the way of living—were brought before all, he says. The women and the men and all who could hear with understanding—the old and the young and anyone with ears to hear—they were all welcomed into worship, because they have hearts ready to be opened. Fair warning—that is why when you get the February newsletter; when

you open it, you are going to read about an experiment that we are going to try out with our Lent worship—one that makes sure that all ears of all ages are able to be in this holy time at this place together while we worship. All—Nehemiah says—those who need to lift voices in song and those for whom silence is long. So there they were all gathered together, and once they were, they brought out scripture. This very book—the one that has the way of life imbued in it, and Ezra, who was called to serve, stood up above all the people in a high and lofty place, not for his benefit, but for theirs so that they could hear him and see him and so that the words he read would reach ears that needed to hear. I don't know if you heard it clearly, but Ezra read all the morning long (starting well before ten AM, just so you know...) He read all the way up until mid-day, long after we are gone. Maybe their world was more complicated and troubling or maybe they just needed more hope or the whisper of new possibilities more than we do. Well, I don't know. But then again, just as it is now, the Word was at the center of what they understood as worship. Many stood there just like the woman at YDS with their arms outstretched, while others put their heads to the ground. Then people kept calling out in the middle of worship Amen, Amen. It turns out that the diversity of response in Marquand Chapel was not radical, new or even novel. It was an echo of something that had gone on long ago. Perhaps here in our beautiful sanctuary, it may be something that we need to remember. If we are to let the power of worship loose in this place—if we are to invite and invoke the spirit to dance in our midst, then maybe we ought to let people of all ages respond to that spirit as they will, whether in the arms raised of an adult—whether in the gleeful cry of a child, or now and then with someone even shouting out, Amen!

In this reading you will notice that the preaching is called *interpretation*. Their job like my job was to open up the word so that all the people could understand the reading, not to just hear and comprehend it but to take it in and apply it—understanding how it matters, not just for the past, but for the given moment and for every moment of their lives. It was not just for comprehension but for direction too—there at the water gate people brought the fullness of their lives before the fullness of God's truth, God's way, God's life and God's love. There, recently settled in a land full of promise and yet brimming with challenge, the people came out wide-eyed.

At that moment they began a way of worshiping, a way of being together rooted in the ancient truth of God as it intersected with the moment of their lives. It is what we are called to be and do in the United Church of Christ; it's emblazoned right there in the preamble of our Constitution. It is this notion that we are called to lean on the truth of all that we have learned, from all who have witnessed and borne insights through it—but we are also called to make our faith our own just like they did at the water gate in reality of worship. The United Church of Christ calls us to be like Marquand Chapel—coming in with regularity and making worship new each time, because, friends, this gathered body changes and the world, it too changes.

But it's not just what we do that makes worship so important and at the center of our lives. What matter is who shows up, but also we understand that in this place and in this act of worship, the very presence and spirit of God meets us face to face. Nancy Taylor often pairs her extravagant welcome at Old South church in Boston—a welcome that often describes worship as essential to our lives as the sun is to that of a plant—with the phrase, “But be warned that to enter into this hallowed and holy time is to come face to face with the

transformative power of God.” There at the water gate—Nehemiah tells us—the people wept. They wept when they heard the word; they wept when it was interpreted for their understanding and they wept there in the transformative power of God, and Nehemiah doesn’t tell us why. Maybe they wept because hearing the truth and beauty of scripture, they wept for the things they had done or left undone. Maybe they wept for the things that God was still doing; maybe they wept for the sorrow they endured or for the arms they felt embracing them there on the spot. Maybe they wept because they saw the empty path their lives were taking or because suddenly a new way was illuminated before their eyes. Maybe they wept because of all those things and at the same time, so much more. Because friends, when we gather in word, in song, and in prayer in worship, we come face to face with God’s loving presence and of neighbor’s too. All breaking forth when we might feel alone and abandoned, and that is absolutely tear-worthy.

In her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Annie Dillard wrote that, “You have all come improperly dressed.” She asked, “If anyone here has the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke here in worship? It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. They should lash us to our pews for the sleeping God may wake some day and take offense or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.” But that is the point, right—that we are sent from this place transformed and changed, to live the fullest of life—to eat the fat and drink the sweet wine and enjoy it all. And also, as Nehemiah adds—to send those portions to those who have not, for having been drawn out into the goodness of life, how could we want anything less for anyone else? Friends, this worship is not benign settling down kind of hour; it should be a work out, a practice, engaging in risk-taking over and over again until God’s confidence and compassion make a difference in us so that we can be sent to make a difference in God’s world, speaking confidently of and from our faith—until Christ’s heart, like a bead-covered gourd, sounds the beat to which our lives move—each of us a love song being sung. That is why I believe this time together is the single most important time in the whole week. It is the single most important thing that can happen to each of us, to this community, and I pray to the entire world—for here we settle in so that God might make her home in us, just like at Yale—dynamic and changing.

We settle in because this body of Christ is always changing and so is the world around us. Friends, may this time each and every week grant us courage to adventure and to date—to lift the fallen and to guide the feet that stumble, If we take worship seriously, we will see the beginnings of heaven that has already drawn near in Christ and beckons us to follow. If we do, I promise you, we will forever be changed and with us the world too. May this time of worship always be worthy of God’s holy name and holy purpose.. Amen.



The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor