

My family moved from Woodlynne to Merchantville in 1953. We attended Grace Church along with members of the extended Druce Family. My cousins Charlie, Ted and Jeanne, my Aunt Jane and my grandparents; Albert Edward Druce, Sr. and Florence Druce to name some. I remember very distinctly the entrance to the Church nearest Maple Terrace, the street we walked up that led to Maple Avenue where the Church was located. (Merchantville was and is a very maple-ly place!) I remember this entrance because we walked behind and alongside the rear of the choir which also was the organ case. There in the aisle were two upright pieces of wood attached to the floor and at the top of each was a hole drilled in the side of each piece. I quizzed my father about them, why were they there? He replied that there was, in the past, a pump handle that was connected to bellows that supplied air to the organ so it could be played before the organ was electrified; but the pump handle had only recently been removed and the pieces I had seen supported that handle and had been left behind.

Now, I was an odd child in-as-much-as I could be found in the BIG (Adult) Church. Most kids my age went to Sunday School

and attended Children's Chapel. They did not go in the BIG Church. However, both my parents attended and, as a result, there was no one at home to receive me while they were in BIG Church. So I went to Children's Chapel, Sunday School and BIG Church. I was not unhappy about this particular arrangement; after BIG Church I could count on my Grandmother for an ice cream cone or some other treat.

How convenient to be able to blame your Grandmother for your ice cream addiction! And to blame your family for your addiction to Church Music; I should say, Episcopal Church Music. I have zero memory of the music I heard at Marshall Memorial Methodist Church in Woodlynne before we moved to Merchantville. Back then, the year was divided into Morning Prayer Sundays and Holy Communion Sundays. The music I most distinctly remember is from Morning Prayer. Specifically the *Benedictus es Domine*. Prayer Book 1928 was in use at the time of my childhood, but it's the same in Prayer Book 1979, Rite One, where it is Canticle 2 on page 49.

BLESSED art thou, O Lord God of our fathers: * praised and exalted above all for ever.

Blessed art thou for the Name of thy Majesty: * praised and exalted above all for ever.

Blessed art thou in the temple of thy holiness: * praised and exalted above all for ever.

Blessed art thou that beholdest the depths, and dwellest between the Cherubim: * praised and exalted above all for ever.

Blessed art thou on the glorious throne of thy kingdom: * praised and exalted above all for ever.

Blessed art thou in the firmament of heaven: * praised and exalted above all for ever.

What you just heard is theology cast as poetry. In this particular instance an ancient literary convention, used in Hebrew poetry, is preserved in translation. Specifically, repetition. Hebrew poetry prominently used repetition which you heard in the phrase "...praised and exalted above all for ever" that is repeated as the conclusion to each verse.

I believe that having the phrase "...praised and exalted above all for ever." stuck in your head is a very good thing indeed! And I have found it's much more easily remembered when sung to music.

(Sing) "Blessed art thou in the firmament of heaven: *
praised and exalted above all for ever."

70 years later it's still playing in my head. Not a bad thing!
It is an extremely important tune and text to hear and affirm.
It is the "First Great Commandment" in different words.
Thinking about the People of Israel, the unique belief they
held, compared to other groups of people, was that YHWH,
their God was, in fact the only God: it's called Monotheism.
We have been enmeshed in the concept of ONE GOD,
monotheism, for so long that the concept of many gods is, to
us, not comprehensible. Here I want to make two
observations; 1. While the idea of more than one god is not
something to which we give credence, there are many who
do. For many of the world's people polytheism is the norm
and they think of us as just plain wrong. And 2. In our
community of faith the empty places in the pews no longer
can be ascribed to those of our community who are not
present. We can't look out and say "Where's Mary, Oh, she's
with her daughter in Ohio; or Where's Sam, Maybe down at
the Shore." Rather, they can be ascribed to those who have
never sat in one of our or any other community of faith's pew.
They are people who have no concept of deity and they are,
for the most part, people we do not know. They are not

monotheists, they are not polytheists. They are not even atheists. They fit nowhere in any discussion of theism. This presents a challenge that the early Christians did not face. There is more than a little truth to be found thinking that theism, a concept of deity, has, for many, been replaced by materialism. But, other than pointing out to us where we must look for our sins against God, this knowledge constitutes a strategy for nothing other than the recognition of defeat. We need to act on this knowledge in ministry.

So, we need to reaffirm the Second Great Commandment: love your neighbor as yourself. We need to love our neighbors with acts of charity. Good news, we got that part: the Kitchen of Hope is a sterling example. And we need to love our neighbors who do not know Jesus, who do not know God, who do not even recognize deity and, as a result, I firmly believe, do not know themselves. Simply put; if you don't know who God is, the Creator of all that is, the Creator of love, and, most specifically, the Creator of YOU, you cannot possibly know who you are. Why are so many now so disaffected, looking in the wrong places for happiness, angry at the world? Why have so many given up on hope and embraced a very dark cynicism that is self-realizing? Because they do not know who they are and they, therefore,

cannot direct their lives in paths that lead to happiness. And of course, in their nihilism they are of little value to themselves and they are incapable of loving their neighbors as themselves, because they are incapable of loving; love is not part of their persona.

Now, if they are hungry, I am in complete agreement that they **MUST** be fed. But, one more meal for many really means one more day of meaningless, empty, loveless, reasonably well-fed existence, Well, friends, we know a better way, we live a better way and that better way **STARTS** with knowing who God is, our Creator, and knowing who we are, God's Created - created in the image of God - and knowing that the gift of our lives is an act of God's love.

Well, we've given food to the needy. What else must we be ready to give and **HOW** can we give what is needed? Here I want to suggest something that steps beyond how we usually think about this. By whatever name, after food, our typical next response to the needy is a series of words. Don't get me wrong, words are important and can be life giving. I'm using words now to talk to you. But, they are not the whole story. Who among us would like to go through life never being touched, kissed, hugged? There is more to

communication than speech. *And who among us would like to go through life never experiencing anything that is beautiful?* Truth and beauty are close cousins; beauty can help us along our way to the truth that is God.

What should we bring to bear as we do ministry that goes beyond feeding the hungry? I've mentioned touch. I know that both my children, and my dogs, were and are more open to my input when we are connected by touch. The COVID restrictions that changed and restricted the way we functioned as a Community of Faith took away some of our tools for communication and we were poorer for their absence. Hand to hand contact when we exchange the Peace literally makes it possible for us to feel the love.

There are other things we do that go beyond words that enhance communication. César and I asked Father Todd to come to our home and bless it this past April. Many people were present, family and friends. After most of our guests had left, my Cousin Chris asked me why Father Todd poured a little water into the wine before it was consecrated. Answer: to remind us of the water that poured out of the wound in Jesus' side when he was pierced on the Cross. Hearing this, Cousin Chris felt a shiver. The picture was now complete and

the truth had been conveyed to Chris through more than words. A quick tour through the nave and sanctuary will put us in contact with many images that can lead us to truth that is felt. Look at the Celebrant today, notice the symbolic gestures that deepen the meaning of the words. Festive occasions usher in the use of incense, incense that symbolically lifts our prayers upward as that same incense focuses our inner attention upwards while engaging our sense of smell.

But of all the approaches we may take to go beyond words, Music is the most universal. Music has the ability to take words **and the thoughts those words represent** and transcend them into a higher level of beauty, a more true expression of truth and a more perfect experience of love. For it is the sung word that has the truest path to the ears of our souls, our souls where we will find our unique gift of the Holy Spirit; where we will connect most deeply with the WHO that we are: a created person, created in the image of God, our Creator; created by love, in love and for love.

As a community of faith we have a unique tradition of employing music in the service of our ministry. Did you know that every text in the Hymnal (With the exception of National Anthems, numbers 700 and up in the Hymnal) must be based

on Scripture and/or the Book of Common Prayer? Did you know that the first monastic community to be established in England after the dissolutions under Henry VIII, Little Gidding by name, dating to 1626, had as its principle act of worship, the continuous singing, day and night, of the Psalms of David? All 150 of them were sung in their entirety every day. We can draw a direct line to the tradition of Little Gidding to our community every time we sing a Psalm.

Singing and music are universal expressions of communication. Can you name a culture that has no music? As we redirect our focus from survival to the ministry entrusted to us by Jesus the Christ: to “make believers of all nations”, HEAR THAT AGAIN, ... from survival to the ministry entrusted to us by Jesus the Christ: to “make believers of all nations.” we would do well to think that our music should be done well. Really well. And that should be in the forefront of our effort. It has been said that we should put our best foot forward. For that we need competent, professional leadership for our music. The repeat phrase of the *Benedictus es Domine* is still playing in my head. In my heart I know that it is the tune that lifts the words of the message to the gates of heaven and keeps the message at

the core of my being. “Blessed art thou, O Lord God of our fathers, praised and exalted above all for ever.”

So I ask you to consider our much broader ministry, much more than a community that survives another day: we are a community that has at its center the truth of the Creation. Will you help yourself, and all of us, to become the best versions of ourselves? Will you consider the whole of our ministry as you consider your pledge in this season where we account for our past and consider our ongoing stewardship? Will you include an appreciation of the gifts this community of faith has received and respond in thanksgiving singing a song of joy? “Praised and exalted for ever.”