

Tradition and Change

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: I Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

Well, what did the pastor learn on her 3-month sabbatical? What fresh spiritual insights will she impart? What 12-part sermon series will she develop to share the enlightenment produced by all that leisure time?

I was actually more anxious than usual as I prepared this sermon, my first one back with you, wondering if I would be a little rusty, and off my game. When I confessed this to my colleagues (who have done a superb job in my absence. Thank you very much, Dick, Missy, and Eric!), they advised me: “Oh, Louise, don’t try to be witty or wise or intellectual. Just be yourself!”

So I decided to take their advice. Today and next Sunday I want to share with you some observations emerging from the luxury of sabbatical—a time when I could reflect on “being” church apart from the daily pressure of “doing” church. I want us to consider these observations in the dynamic context of tradition and change—thoughtfully preserving our essential values and Reformed theological understanding, while courageously learning new “ways and means” of proclaiming the transformational grace of Jesus Christ within a digitalized, individualized, technologized postmodern culture.

Our morning Scripture text comes from a biblical scene of homecoming and reunion: the dedication of the temple, first envisioned by King David, but brought to reality by his son Solomon. This was a huge enterprise—the Bible devotes two full chapters to construction and furnishing details. No expense was spared; some 150,000 laborers were conscripted to cut the stone, produce the lumber, and cast the bronze for the impressive structure, which took seven years to complete.

What's even more important to remember about the temple in ancient Israel: it was, quite literally, the dwelling place of God, showing the centrality of God's rule in their community life. So it's not surprising that Solomon gathers "all of Israel" to dedicate this magnificent building, the very throne of heaven, and he can be forgiven for a little self-congratulation in his introductory remarks. Our text follows immediately, and is the prayer he offers on that auspicious occasion. What is surprising-- and significant for us-- is King Solomon's recognition of the limitations of that temple, and his insistent focus on God's greatness, rather than his own. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the first book of Kings, in the eighth chapter at the 22nd verse.

[I Kings 8:22-30, 41-43]

Over the summer I made a point to worship in a variety of churches in four parts of the country—from mega-type non-denominational churches to large downtown Presbyterian churches—even the mid-sized congregation my dad served as pastor for 17 years. I will confess that a couple of Sundays found me voting instead for coffee and the newspaper, but I always felt later as if I'd missed something. Here's my first observation: every church I visited is concerned about the reduced role of religion in postmodern culture. Whether worship attendance was 200 or 2000, what I heard from church members was the sense that church is on the margins of life, rather than at the center. I heard the usual complaints about team sports and games and practice schedules. But I also heard a universal perception that participation in a faith community is an entirely optional rather than mandatory practice. One reaction to this cultural phenomenon is to make explicit the contrast between faith and culture—and to ratchet up the heat regarding the perils of ignoring the one in favor of the other. The preaching I heard in these congregations quoted the Bible freely, a verse here, a verse there, applied to contemporary situations as either a warning against secular culture, or as a formula for happiness and success. Interestingly, these congregations used digital technology to full advantage, every bit as well as other

churches who respond to the challenge of culture by co-opting it—designing worship that feels not unlike an MTV video—full of contemporary visual imagery, strong emotion, and pop music. The mega-church service I attended on the July Fourth weekend can only be described this way. A full sound and light crew were perched in a booth at the back of a large auditorium, and both colored lighting and music were woven seamlessly throughout the service, creating ambience and providing background music for prayers and a bridge between the offering and the sermon. Several guitars, two electronic keyboards, drums and other rhythm instruments, a soloist and choir made up entirely of Abercrombie and Fitch models led the congregation in singing praise songs and choruses, during which most of the people were on their feet, clapping and swaying, dancing and singing. Worship had spontaneous energy and passion, and I could understand how a casual observer might contrast that with the fixed liturgy and calm order of our services and find those qualities lacking. The place was packed with families with young children, men as well as women, youth and older adults. . . . on a holiday weekend! The sermon at that church was delivered almost in the manner of a late-night TV opening monologue—peppered with jokes and stories, a few Bible verses, along with the preacher’s witty advice. I admit to a little bias here (okay, a LOT of bias!), but I found the sermon akin to cotton candy—tasty, sugar spun to perfection, but inadequate for providing real nourishment.

What I DID find engaging is the way these churches reached beyond their walls and into the culture to attract people— even folks who were largely unaware of their need for relationship with God. And in that regard I think they have some things to teach us.

Just as Solomon understood that God could not be contained within the walls of the temple, so can we in the mainline see that the walls of our church do not define the boundaries of God’s presence and activity. God’s rule is universal—over the church, but also over the world. Can we envision a church

without walls? Church as a verb rather than a noun; a way of following Christ rather than a particular place? The Internet offers us new ways to connect people –with each other, with Fairmount, with God. For example, Fairmount has scores of confirmed members who are attending college or graduate school or working at their first jobs. They aren't living here, but nor have they settled in any one locale. The fact is, their physical address may change almost annually. They're impossible to keep up with! On the other hand, Facebook accounts stay constant. Offering a "Fairmount Facebook group" could help us stay connected with these beloved members, and could help them more strongly identify with their church home, until they're sufficiently established to make another one.

A number of you checked out the blog I kept, with reflections on some of the experiences and study that engaged me. The blog received over 3000 "hits" and generated around 90 written comments, enough to inspire me to continue it as one (not the only one!) discussion portal; a way to include more Fairmounters in conversation about our congregation's vision and mission.

Within worship itself digital technology offers new ways to tell the gospel story—through projected images and pictures, cultural icons and symbols that spark emotions as well as intellect. As some of you have pointed out, stained glass windows were one of the first ways the church employed visual imagery to communicate; why not continue to do so with today's technology? I'm intrigued by the idea of *looking* for God's Word as well as *listening* for it, and hope you and I can think together about how to do so faithfully and effectively.

Which prompts another observation from the summer's experiences: reformed theology has a lot to offer a digitalized world. So many of the churches I attended had no confession of sin, no prayer concerns beyond those of the congregation. At least part of my sense of the "light weight" nature of these services came from the lack of connection with the complexity,

suffering, and profound insecurity of the real world, and of the human condition. The mainline church –and certainly Fairmount--is a thinking church; we value intellect and science, and incorporate human knowledge and learning into faith. Our goal is not to remove ourselves from the culture, but to live in it thoughtfully and prayerfully and actively in such a way as to participate with God in its redemption. The scope of our concern is as broad as the universe, and as deep as the inner recesses of the human heart. This could be our gift--- exercised for growing the church, and *also for blessing the world*. “Being church” is finally not about filling the pews, but about fulfilling God’s plan to build a heavenly kingdom right here on earth. That high purpose calls forth our best effort to utilize every tool and technology, in service to our Lord. Tradition *and* change; holding fast to what is good and true; seeking ever to reach beyond these walls into the world God so loved and came in Jesus Christ to save.

I feel privileged to have been given the opportunity to go beyond these beloved walls to renew, recharge, and rest. Thank you for the sabbatical time. The variety of worship services I experienced provoked both inspiration and gratitude—inspiration as I saw new possibilities for worship and connecting, and deep gratitude to be pastor in a congregation that gets a lot of stuff right, and is spiritually curious about the rest. One year ago as we were planning the Fall season, I received a cancer diagnosis and the trajectory of many of those plans changed significantly. Now a year later and fully recovered, I can’t wait to launch into another year of worship and faith formation, fellowship and mission. My greatest hope is that we will dedicate ourselves to the God who is greater than all we can plan or imagine, the God who is faithful to all generations, the God who calls from tomorrow and walks with us today. Amen.