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On the Place of Hospitality in Ecumenical Worship

As those of you who have been reading the Marquand Reader for years know, the daily ecumenical worship program in Marquand Chapel is built on five principles: Diversity, Inclusivity, Hospitality, Ecumenism and Diversity. Each week for the next few weeks, the Reader will explore each principle in more depth.

Hospitality is what makes the other four principles possible to practice. It is, however, the one that we talk least about: we perform it far more than we talk about it. Inclusivity, Diversity, Ecumenism, and Participation are also primarily performed, of course, but they are each already established facets of church life and theological education, such that one can find them discussed in multiple venues in a divinity school's curriculum. We talk about them in chapel, then, as a way of both enriching the program and furthering the discussions about them going on in all the various additional venues around the school. Hospitality, however, is most effective when it is *done* to you and not when it is *described* to you.

An analogy might be provided by the canteen workers by whom we are blessed at the Divinity School: the hospitality they perform daily, not by merely serving food, but by smiling, chatting, sharing stories about their families and taking an interest in ours, decorating the refectory for the seasons, putting some food item here and not there so it is more appealing or easily reached – these multiple acts of care and consideration all transform mere food service into fellowship and meal-sharing.

Hospitality has become a buzzword in contemporary English-speaking cultures. When it comes to chapel then, it is necessary to distinguish the sorts of hospitality we value from those we do not. Hospitality in this context is not the “friendliness” of corporate marketing values (“was your service agent friendly?”); it is not the greeters-culture of Walmart foyers; it is not the lavish consumerist diversions of hospitality lounges; and it is not the customer-is-always-right notion that whoever you are, whatever your beef is, you can express it with impunity.

Hospitality as it relates to worship conveys a different message: it is not saying: we need you to buy, but “we want you to live”—with the double meaning of: we need you if we are to live as fully as we can as people of God, and: we need you to thrive, flourish and be wholly your beloved selves. Worship is not about worship leaders giving something to the people in the pews. Worship is about the whole body of Christ coming together, as God's body, through the sheer act of praising God together. Hosting in this context, then, is serving. It is teasing out, beckoning, listening, cultivating, bearing with and reaching out, always asking: what would you need to be able to pray with me, or to lead me in prayer? And what do I need from you, and how can I open myself to pray with you when you invite it?

The sort of hospitality that Christian discipleship demands of us is the sort that worship demands of us. It involves, as Paul makes plain on numerous occasions, welcoming one another. It is not enough for the clergy to welcome the congregation (and in our culture it can be confused with consumerist models of hospitality); the whole congregation has to be welcoming the whole congregation, and worship plays a vital role in this regard.

It involves a peculiar set of practices, and Readers in coming weeks will examine each in a little depth. These include things like: vesting, dress-codes, how we sing, greetings at the door, sharing food or drink, the role of the narthex, greetings in the liturgy, how invitations are issued to the table and to other liturgical acts, whether to have a bulletin or now, how the bulletin is laid out, the use of announcements, explaining things but not over-explaining them, being patient, suspending some judgments and, the thing that we will look at this week: seating.

If you are late, have a crying child, have a disability, suffer a crowd-phobia, are waiting for an urgent phone call, have a large body-shape, or need the restroom a lot, and you arrive at worship in our chapel, then you need to be able to find a seat at the end of a row and/or that allows you to sit near the doors. If everyone who has arrived in good time has already occupied those seats, then these people simply come to the doors, take a look inside, can not identify a place to sit, and turn and leave. Some never come back.

The simplest – and most important – way in which this community can welcome one another, therefore, is for those who come in time, and who are able to do so, to move both deep into the space and into the middles of the rows of seats. This leaves the end-of-row seats and the seats by the door free for those who will need them.

Of course, moving into the space, or into a row might feel uncomfortable. And starting worship with that feeling might elicit resentment towards those who suggest this seating practice as a spiritual discipline, as a practice of hospitality. As one email to me a few years ago put it: “I should be able to sit wherever I damn well want when I go to church.” These feelings are quite natural: ritual forms us in deep and profound ways and the bodily habits we associate with “going to church” are very difficult to undo.

Most acts of hospitality require a giving of something we have, and in this case, what acting in a way that welcomes others often requires is a giving-up of the feelings of either comfort or sitting on the sidelines that we gain by sitting on the end of a row and/or near the door. This can feel like giving up something that conditions our own safety. If after trying it several times, you feel like it requires you to give up too much, then, of course, do not do it. But, as most people who have tried it have discovered, after a while those feelings subside and the pleasure of seeing someone who needs it sit in the chair where we would have preferred to seat ourselves can be quite intense, because the knowledge that they are in worship with us when they might not have been is quite profound.

A Note about the New Sung Morning Prayer Starting this Week, by Patrick Evans.

“Traditional Texts in Global and Contemporary Settings”

On Wednesday, September 30, we will begin another cycle of Sung Morning Prayer. This version – “Traditional Texts in Global and Contemporary Settings” – is well known to returning students. Many have remarked that this setting- in which we sing *O Worship the*

King in an Indonesian mode, *Love Divine* in Mark Miller's jazz-inspired setting, and Isaac Watts' beloved *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* in a six-part South African *Senzenina* setting – helps them to hear familiar words in new ways – to gain new inspiration and insight from texts that are so well known that they sometimes might slip into rote repetition with the tunes many have known from childhood. It is not our intention to replace those familiar tunes forever, but to sing in wonder at these words reinterpreted.

We sing Bobby McFerrin's chanted setting of *Psalm 23* (dedicated to his mother, his own paraphrase of the psalm text uses feminine pronouns for God.) Christian Tamaela, whose *We Wait for New Heavens* we now know by heart, offers a Javanese tune for the Lord's prayer. But in my mind, the part of this SMP setting that best exemplifies our ecumenical life together in Marquand is Calvin Hampton's gorgeous setting of "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy."

In my first year here, one of our chapel organists, an Episco-Baptist from Alabama, recommended this setting from the 1982 Episcopal hymnal. Most folks in chapel didn't know it, including most of the Episcopalians (perhaps because the same text is set to a much easier-to-play tune on a nearby page). So we all learned it together – the three verses in the 1982 hymnal, as well as an additional verse from the original Frederick Faber text: "But we make God's love too narrow with false limits of our own, and we magnify God's strictness with a zeal Love cannot own." Because we repeat the same sung morning prayer setting for at least four weeks, this hymn had time to sink into people's hearts, to become the theology deepest within. By the end of the cycle, most folks – Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, UCC, Catholic, Pentecostal – could hear the haunting introductory melody and sing by heart the three Episcopalian verses, plus the "extra" very traditional verse in a decidedly "new song." Most folks don't think of this as an Episcopal hymn any more, but a hymn we all know and love. (And the Lutherans have picked it up in their new 2007 hymnal!)

In daily ecumenical worship in Marquand chapel, we are re-telling, re-living, and re-singing the story of redemption as we rehearse both for the work we are to do in the world, and for that great day when all voices will be resurrected and raised in the praise of God. We need you to raise your voice with us in that rehearsal – please join us!

Reflecting on Last Wednesday's Water Prayer

Last Wednesday, the Irish artist Aileen Lambert worked with the chapel team to lead sung morning prayer. The service fell in the middle of her week as artist in residence in Marquand, a week in which she held water in her cupped hands at the threshold to the chapel before and after each morning's worship service. The water she used each day was from Holy Wells in Wexford Ireland, and she had collected it in the weeks before her visit. Worried about getting it through customs, she also posted several bottles of it, with the customs ticket – which is on my office door if you'd like to see it -- reading "holy water".

Holy wells in Ireland are Christian sites of prayer and healing, and each usually bears the name of a Saint, of Jesus or of Mary. Many of the cures they are believed to hold (this one for sight, that one for lameness, another for worry), are thought to be the same today as those associated with each holy well before the coming of Christianity in the 600's. It is also thought they were baptism sites for many centuries after the advent of Christianity.

By beginning Wednesday's service with a walk, Aileen referred us to the fact that holy wells require a walk to get to them and to the fact that most people in this world have to walk to get any sort of water. By having to carry and preserve our full cup of water for the period of this "camino" in the context of worship, we were called to connect with our own relationship to water, a central common symbol of faith for most Christians in this ecumenical setting. By moving our awareness from our relationship to water to our breath, and then hearing the narrative of Jesus's baptism, we were invited to be refreshed by God's Spirit.

Aileen has left the holy water in the bottles she used to transport it on the table under the Prayer Board outside chapel. Please feel free to take it, as needed. And please pray, when you take it, for the people of the town-land (where each well was sited) named on each bottle. Aileen also left some printed-copies of her previous artwork on this table and you are welcome to take these as long as supplies last.

Looking ahead to this Week's Services.

Monday was Quaker Worship.

Tuesday is a Hymn Festival, led by Rusty Edwards with Mark Miller. Rusty is a well-known American hymn writer, whose compositions appear in many churches' hymnals and repertoires. He is currently serving as an ISM Visiting Fellow and we are thrilled that he will lead us in this festival of song with our Gospel Choir Director, and Rusty's long-time friend and collaborator, Mark Miller.

The following is from Wikipedia:

Rusty Edwards is a [hymnwriter](#) who has been an ordained minister for over 24 years, and is currently the Senior Pastor of Christ Lutheran Church in [Marietta, Georgia](#) (a suburb of [Atlanta](#)). Over two dozen of his hymns have been published in 67 books used by 36 denominations in Australia, Canada, China, England, Japan, New Zealand, Scotland, and the USA. He has published five collections of hymns, and Dave Brubeck wrote a tune for his song "As the Moon is to the Sun" which is included in the 2008 book, "Dave Brubeck at the Piano." Two of his texts appear on a Swedish CD, recorded in Sweden to support UNICEF. His best known songs so far are: We All are one in Mission, Praise the One who Breaks the Darkness, Now it is Evening, Loving Spirit, To a Maid Engaged to Joseph, and Each Breath, Every Heartbeat. His most recent song is "Open," co-written with Debra von Fischer Samuelson and Mark A. Miller. He is an honorary citizen of Austin, Texas and a Kentucky Colonel. On January 22, 2009, the City of Tyler, Texas held a "Rusty Edwards Hymn Writer Day."

Wednesday is Sung Morning Prayer and we start the new cycle of "Traditional Texts in Global and Contemporary Settings"

Thursday is titled Rel716: Liberation, and will be led by the Asian Christianity Class.

Friday is a Feast of Faith, offering a message of Faith in Real Time, led by Yale Black Seminarians.

And this Thursday 10/1, we will have our first Roundtable Discussion of the Year. At a table in the Common Room, 12.30-1.30pm. Come discuss and learn about ecumenical worship and how to put what we do in Marquand into practice in your own communities.