

How To Behave In Church

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



II Samuel 6:1-16; Psalm 150

I remember with great fondness an exchange that took place over and over again during my adolescent years. The scene is a McConnell family trip. My brothers were already out of the house and so typically it was mom, dad and me in the car. Dad usually driving. Me riding shotgun. And mom in the back seat reading. She was a voracious reader so she often ignored the exchange that would take place repeatedly between me and my father. And it was over the radio. The one car radio. Not the three iPods, iPads or iPhones into which we could each lose ourselves and thus avoid any exchange, any conversation – but the one car radio and the ensuing negotiation over what music to listen to. Fortunately my two older brothers had negotiated years before the ground rules with my father that when it came to a family trip the deal was that dad got a half hour of his music and the kid riding shotgun got a half hour of his music and we would rotate from one half hour to the next. So when it came to dad and me – it was a half hour of Glen Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Adagio for Strings and Bach's Prelude and Fugue in C Minor – and – a half hour of Deep Purple, Uriah Heep, Edgar Winter and the Rolling Stones. Closely the two of us would watch our watches so that not a minute would extend beyond the tortuous time of having to listen to the other one's music. And, of course, all along both father and I would offer running commentary on the demerits of each other's music. Occasionally Dad would say as he is listening to Mick Jagger, for example, screech away, "You know, someone should really put that guy out of his misery. Do you think that guy needs a doctor; he really seems to be in a lot of pain. Do you honestly call that music?" And when

it was my turn I would respond with such things as: "I didn't know it was legal to play this music outside an elevator. You know if you listen to this too long you'll fall asleep at the wheel." On and on we would go, all in good humor, trying together to navigate the generational musical divide. One car, one car radio, and different people.

Of course I date myself when I tell that story. The thought of such negotiation in the aftermath of Steve Jobs is nearly impossible to comprehend for those born since 1990. No need to listen to anything, or watch anything, you don't like. And for all of us, no matter when we were born, it is the pattern. For music, for TV, for political commentary -- just put the ear buds on and listen to whatever you like or agree with.

It takes place in all sort of places and the church is not immune. The people of God because we are so fully human tend to cluster around our likes and dislikes, our tastes and our passions and figuratively sometimes put the ear buds in.

While I was away this summer I happened to be driving through rural North Carolina on a Sunday morning and there was this patch of road where you couldn't drive more than a quarter mile without seeing a little church. A little church with a little parking lot usually full of cars. Baptist Church. Methodist Church. Pentecostal Church. Presbyterian Church. Episcopal Church. Black church. White church. And while it was wonderful to see so many cars parked in so many churches, it made you wonder whether all these folks going to all these little churches all within 3 miles of each other...if it wasn't another way of putting on the ear buds.

I'm not sure there is any way around that. It often shows up in worship. They've said for a long time that the most segregated hour of the week is 11:00 on Sunday. And that used to be and still is a commentary between the white church and the black

church and the racial divide between the two. But it's also a commentary on style and music and taste. I worship this way, I worship that way. I can't quite get that kind of worship, I don't quite understand what they are trying to do in that kind of worship. Too much dancing there, too much quiet here. I like the preacher here, I don't like the preacher there. And on and on it goes. And instead of listening to one radio we put on our ear buds.

And so you wonder if there isn't a little bit of this going on when we read of David and his people parading the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. It's quite a moment. Not unlike that burning bush and its holy ground, the Ark of the Covenant is this holy sign of the presence of God not to be tampered

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with – not to get our fingerprints on – not even to be steadied as Uzzah learned the hard way. And then comes David who as the ark makes its way into the center of Jerusalem loses himself in this moment of praise and gratitude. He loses himself in worship. He strips both body and soul – and his gratitude is exposed. Vulnerable worship before the people. And sure enough someone doesn't like it. One of David's wives – Michal – she is not happy. David has not acted like a king. He has not acted presidential. He has been too human. He has been too thankful. He is not to Michal's liking. Not to her taste. Why

it is downright shameful. And we can understand. I suspect if my next move today was to strip down to a linen covering that leaves little to the imagination it might be my last act in this church. It wouldn't be just one Michal waiting at my office door. So David goes home and get's a what-for from his wife. "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar man might shamelessly do!" How dare he. And David's response is, "Oh, but it was before the Lord that I danced."

It was before the Lord that I danced. And in those words are found the deep and simple truth behind what we all struggle to do. What we all aim to do. What we all want permission to do. It was before the

Lord that I danced. We just want that moment when somehow, somehow we give ourselves to God. Our praise, our thanks, our gifts, our confession, our pain, our questions. And the challenge of course comes in that we all choose a different way to do this. Even in this sanctuary there are as many ways we do this as there are people in the pews. We say our common creed - we preach from the same Scriptures – but then we bring our heart and minds and souls and emotions and silences before the Alpha and Omega – and it is before the Lord that we dance.

Tony Campolo tells the story of leading worship at his local church and leading the congregation in prayer. And after the service a member of his church came to him and said, “Dr. Campolo I just want you to know that I heard seven grammatical errors in your prayer this morning.” And Campolo without missing a beat replied, “That’s all right, I wasn’t talking to you anyway.”

It was before the Lord that I danced.

And so the Psalmist says,

Praise him with trumpet sound;

Praise him with tambourine and dance;

Praise him with strings and pipe!

Praise him with clanging cymbals

Praise him with loud, clashing cymbals.

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

And the truth is not all those instruments are not going to be to our liking. Some we’re not used to – but the entire Psalter ends with the words, “LET everything that breathes praise the Lord.” Emphasis on LET.

Because the truth is whenever and wherever we might arrive in some sacred space – wherever two or three are gathered – there is this mystery of the soul. And we just don’t know what worship is taking place in the soul next to us. For some it’s dancing. For some it’s silent meditation. For some it’s blasting out a hymn. For some it’s singing a praise song. For some it’s hands up. For some it’s hands clasped. For some it’s, “Thank you.” For some it’s, “Why?” But for everything that breathes it is this sacred mystery of expression.

And it makes me think of my mother’s favorite hymn. A hymn entitled, “Jerusalem the Golden”. Don’t look it up, it’s not in our hymnbook. It hasn’t been in the Presbyterian hymn book since 1955. And these days whenever it gets dusted off to sing – it’s rather laborious for most people because they don’t know it. But she knew it from her Methodist days and she

loved it. So the time came when my granddaddy died. My mother’s father. And the Sunday following the funeral we were back in church and we opened the bulletin and there it was, “Jerusalem the Golden.” My father had placed it in the service for one person. One person. His bride. And so the time comes to sing and I look over and my mother is not singing. She is weeping. Weeping. The rest of us are stumbling through this unfamiliar hymn and one woman in the 500 is weeping. She is weeping, grieving, before the Lord – and the rest of us, unbeknownst to most, are there to help her as best we can to do that.

Jerusalem the Golden, we haltingly sang.

Jerusalem the Golden, with milk and honey blest.

Beneath thy contemplation sink heart and soul oppressed.

I know not, O I know not, what joys await us there;

What radiancy of glory, what bliss beyond compare.

And of course it’s what we know to be true. That the Church has always been that place where we gather to help each other offer what we have to the Lord. To dance. To weep. To laugh. To serve. To pray. To shout. To whisper. To everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. And we are at our best aren’t we that when we walk into places like these – it’s not about us it’s about the One and Only and the one who sits beside us.

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard reminded us long ago that inside these spaces the audience is God and we are the performers. When we sing, we sing before the Lord. When we dance, we dance before the Lord. When we pray, we pray before the Lord. When we clap, we clap before the Lord. When we sit silent, we sit silent before the Lord.

A pastor friend of mine shared a story with me about an elder in his church who was in one of their services and they were singing a song that wasn’t to his liking. It was too modern. Too up tempo. Too

loud. And with every line he was getting angrier and angrier. Until he looked over and saw his friend. His friend twenty years older than him. And he was doing his best to sing. He knew it wasn’t his song either. But he was humbled to see that he was trying because he knew that it was important to somebody else.

So I love when Jesus tells the stories about the different worshippers. The one about the man who is dumping big bags of money into the temple coffers, followed by the widow slipping in silently the last two pennies she’s got. Or the Pharisee praying aloud reminding God how lucky God is that he’s on his side and next to him the tax collector pouring out his soul begging for mercy. The sacred mystery of expression. One never knows what emotion lies deep within the soul.

You know, in that battle of the radio, my father got the better of me. Not that he was trying to get the better of me, but he did. I never gave up loving rock and roll, and still play it all the time on my car radio. But I sure came to love the orchestra too. And I’m more apt to show up at the Van Weizel for the symphony than for a reunion tour for Deep Purple. And what blessing there was when I got to sit with my daddy in those last few years – with his Alzheimer’s keeping him from conversation – to sit in his den – a holy of holies -- and listen without negotiation the music that fell sweetly upon my ears, if only because it fell sweetly upon his. For it was before the Lord that we danced.



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Church of the Palms

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