

## “And the Award Goes to...”

(1 Kings 8)

On Wednesday morning last week I got an email with the subject line, “First Congregational Receives 2009 Best of Janesville Award.” Now, I know this is spam, some kind of marketing ploy, but I admit it, I am curious. It turns out that under the category, “places of worship” we can have a plaque made just for us that declares in 2009 we were one of Janesville’s best. At this point I am thinking two things. First, 2009 isn’t over yet. There are sixteen Sundays left, I counted! That’s a lot of pressure for those remaining worship services to live up to. Second, the plaque costs eighty dollars, plus shipping and handling. Then, of course, we’d have to figure out where to put the plaque. I mean it would be gauche to prop it up here by the pulpit, not to mention such an action would call into question our Christian humbleness. But, this of course is not my decision, so for all the Consistory members present, we can take a formal vote on Tuesday.

Now I am sure the folks who sent me that email were being sincere and would truly be glad to send us the plaque. But, I started to wonder if that is really what this moment, this hour, this time we spend in our sanctuary is all about? Is our gathering really in competition with our brothers and sisters in Janesville who are also singing and praying and worshipping? Is it about being the best? Is our deepest desire for our church to have the best choir or organist or pastor? Or is what we are up to this morning about something else, something deeper and almost indescribable, something that cannot be commoditized or quantified.

For me, worship eludes definitions and when trying to describe what I believe worship to be, I find myself fumbling around, grasping at words that don’t fully express what I feel and know to be true in my heart. I toss out words like ‘awe’ and phrases like ‘immersing ourselves’ and ‘steeped in the sacred’. Sometimes I turn to juxtaposing opposites in order to capture what I think worship is about. I might say in worship we are at once cared for and challenged, we are at once loved for who we are and sense this irresistible, unquenchable desire to grow. In worship, we sing out, even if we hit all the wrong notes because our souls demand and would be satisfied with nothing less. But it’s like grasping at straw. Worship is when those tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Worship is about being authentic and heartfelt. Worship is when those honest, keep you awake at night issues like: am I a good husband, father, pastor, friend, what about the future, what about that less than brilliant thing I said at the last Consistory meeting, and all that other stuff that roams around my mind just waiting for the clock to turn 3 a.m. to come out; worship is when I can offer all of that to God and I sense a peace. This peace comes not from easy answers or fairytale endings, but a peace that I know I don’t face those concerns alone. Worship is about being **here** with you, with all of you.

Solomon gathers all of Israel in order to dedicate the temple that took seven years to build. This was a sacred moment. There is this trajectory that from the moment the Israelites stepped into the Sinai wilderness, wandered for forty long years, were given a law that they carried around, made it to the very edge of the promised land before their leader passed into the next life, marched around Jericho with trumpets blasting, built homes and eventually a city, settled in, planted crops, discovered pastures for livestock and found a homeland; but there was this nagging sense to build a temple. From wilderness wandering to city building, worship before the temple was complete took place in a tent. Now, if you went tent camping

this year, you know the pros and cons. Pros: you can move a tent pretty easy, it connects you with creation, and...yes that's pretty much all I've got for pros. The Israelites wanted a place, a structure to symbolize, and a visual reminder that God was with them **permanently**. The temple is a permanent home and place for the Ark of the Covenant, which thanks to Indiana Jones we all know a bit about. The Ark contained the Ten Commandments and the Israelites have this joyous parade carrying the Ark into the newly completed temple. And then we heard his honest, heartfelt prayer that was offered at the altar in our reading this morning. Solomon prays that the temple would not be seen as some confining place for God, but as a reminder of their dynamic, unfolding relationship with the sacred. Solomon prays that the temple would break open hearts of the people for authentic worship and that God's heart too would be open not only to the prayers uttered and absorbed into the newly blessed stone walls, but prayers that would be spoken in people's homes hundreds of miles away when they cast their eyes toward the temple. The temple was never meant to be the only dwelling place for God, God still went tenting and could always be found outside the four walls. But to have a place, to set aside space, and to gather together to pray and sing and share and support and listen and pay attention to the living faith that sometimes in the blur of life we can lose track of, if the temple could help with that, it would be a blessing.

Years later, rabbis would tell young children a wonderful story about two brothers who were farmers. One brother was married and had a family and the other brother was single. Each brother was blessed with a bountiful harvest, grain upon grain. So, the single brother thought he would share some of his harvest with his married brother; after all there were children to be fed and taken care of. So, each night the single brother would sneak grain over. At the same time, the married brother, looking at his full grain house thought he should share some of his bounty with his single brother. After all, the married brother had a son who would care for him in his older years and the single brother would need to subsist on profits from years of farming. So, each night the married brother would sneak grain over. Then, one night, under the bright light of a full moon, the brothers met, arms overflowing with grain, at once realized what was happening and with a warm embrace hugged. And the rabbis say it was on that exact spot where the brothers embraced that Solomon built the temple.

This space is sacred, friends, not because of what is said or sung, but this is where we remember we are fully received, fully embraced, and fully loved. This spot is sacred not because of words spoken by a pastor, but because of your honest, heartfelt, authentic prayers uttered sometimes in sighs too deep for words. This is a sanctuary, a safe place, where we can be ourselves, learn, laugh, taste grace and experience love. How can our response be anything less than enthusiastic? Kirk Bryon Jones points out that word, "enthusiasm" derives from *en theos*, literally "in God."<sup>1</sup> Enthusiasm is what is awoken deep within us and reminds us that we are "in God." That enthusiasm can come out when singing or we can feel it in moments of silence or when we sit here drenched in the colors of the rainbow from sunlight streaming through the stain glass. We gather enthusiastically, we gather together 'in God', to remember what it feels like to be steeped in the sacred, so that we can notice the stirring of the holy out in the world this week. Out in the world where things are unfair and lazy co-workers get promoted. Out in the world where we worry about our mortgage and if our car can make it for another twenty thousand miles. In the world out there it does not always feel like we are 'in God' and our enthusiasm seeps out of us. And then, we gather and do it all again. If our worship is 'in God', friends then we don't need a plaque, we

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk Bryon Jones, *Addicted to Hurry*, pg. 21

need to tell others, we need to invite folks to come with us, to share the journey, to sense that there is a hope and a love and a grace that can make us whole. There is a sacred that brings a smile to our face and awakens a joy, an enthusiasm deep within. That is what worship is all about. And when we trust in and celebrate and share the holy, contagious joy called God, then our worship truly is at its best. May it be so today and for the sixteen remaining Sundays in 2009. Thanks be to God and let the people of God say, "Amen."