

Renewing Our Reconciling Community – Part 1 – God and Worship
October 7, 2007

This morning we begin our 2008 Stewardship Emphasis. We call it an “emphasis” rather a campaign. That is because we recognize that everything we are and we have is a gift from God. Therefore, every day in every way the way we use those gifts – prayers, presence, finances and service – are our spiritual acts of worship. We simply have a period of emphasizing our pledges of those gifts for the coming year. The month of October is when we will conduct that emphasis. Our theme is “Renewing Our Reconciling Community: Christ Reconciles us to God, Ourselves and Others.” You know we have been a “reconciling” congregation for over sixteen years in our commitment to inclusiveness to all people, especially with reference to sexual orientation and gender identity. We have never wavered to that commitment. But recently your church leadership has been involved in a visioning process where we have looked once again at the word “reconciliation.” We have conducted retreats to try to discern God’s leading of us as a congregation into the future. We will be forming a visioning community to further refine that vision of reconciliation as God’s healing and restoring work in the world. So for our Stewardship theme we have chosen a theme looking at this biblical concept of reconciliation.

During this four-week emphasis in the month of October you should have already received by email and we have hard copy of a *daily prayer guide*. You will be receiving a letter, pledge card and invitation to a Stewardship celebration and concert on October 21st featuring great entertainment by the incomparable Rob Landes playing the music of the movies. We will have delicious food and refreshments out on the courtyard that

evening with an opportunity to hear more about the goals of this emphasis. Then on October 28th during worship we will bring our pledge cards to God's altar to be blessed for God's glory for the coming year.

Each week beginning today we will look at one aspect of how the risen Christ is reconciling the world: to God, to ourselves in the faith community, and to others. Our Scriptural theme comes from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that we read this morning. In that passage Paul tells us that we have been reconciled to God through Christ. We therefore have become ambassadors for Christ. An ambassador, says William Barclay, is a special office of authority. We have been empowered to represent God to the world, as Christ is making Christ's appeal through us. And how do we do that? We become loving embodiments of Christ in the world. We become reconciling. At Bering we have our own language around that. We ask ourselves, "Is this a reconciling action?" I love that.

Reconciliation with God, Ourselves and Others. These are all inter-related, but I want to pull them apart and analyze them separately. Today the focus is on reconciliation with God. Faith tradition teaches that we are estranged from God through our sin. Christ reconciles us through his atoning sacrifice and resurrection. We celebrate that in the act of Christian worship. Worship is the main activity through which Christ accomplishes this. Think about it. If we want to introduce someone we know to Bering, what do we do? Now we might invite them to the Second Blessings Rummage Sale...or to Christian education offering such as the Academy or "Homosexuality and the Bible." We might invite them to a Thursday night dinner. But probably we'll invite them to Sunday

worship. For that is how Christ accomplishes the ongoing reconciliation of God's people.

Worship is the pulse – the vital sign – of local congregations. So many of you in telling me your story of how you came to Bering said it was like coming home for the first time. We completed *Sanctuary For All* this year and the space looks great. We are proud of it, aren't we? But is our worship pleasing to God? Does it feel like homecoming to all? Have we done everything we can do not just to welcome those who experience God in the way we experience God, but others as well. You know our worship attendance is down over the last four years. It peaked at about 350 in 2003 and it is now about 200. I think we have to ask ourselves why? Is our worship boring for some? To make worship boring is to bear false witness. In liturgy, there must be a balance of sameness and fresh energy. Do we not engage all the modes of human sense – visual, kinesthetic, linguistic, rational, auditory? I wonder if sometime God asks, "Is this all you have got for me today?" At the risk of being anthropomorphic in speaking of God, I wonder if God says, "I am so in love with you, so passionate for you. I sure would love it if you returned that to me."

Friday night the Noels went to the Greek Festival. Opa! I love the Greek Festival. From the incredible food to ethnic dancing to the music to the large crowds I love everything about it. Every few years I take the tour of the Annunciation Orthodox Church. It serves to unite me with the eastern tradition of Christianity. It fulfills that cosmic prayer that we read from the gospel of John where Jesus prays for us that we would all be united in one body of Christ. I am amazed at the richness of the ancient tradition. Our host, a layperson of the church, seemed so proud of the building and the

Orthodox tradition. He took great pains to describe the symbols of the church in the icons, in the frescos on the ceiling and on the walls. Their sanctuary is different than ours. The congregation sits in pews like ours, but they are separated from the clergy an exclusive area they call the sanctuary (like our chancel) that you transition from carpet to a marble-floored area with the pulpit and a kind of “holy of holies” where the altar of God is featured. There is a beautiful marble screen leading up into this mysterious area where the Greek inscription reads “Where the awe and love of God come together.” Virtually nothing has changed in Eastern Orthodox worship in 1600 years. Our guide made that painfully clear when I asked if they had female clergy! But at the same time they know exactly who they are in their worship that reflects an absolute awe for God. Worship before God is prostrating ourselves – falling on our faces before a loving and awe-inspiring God. That expression can vary in every congregation.

What is unique to Bering and who we are as people of God? What is our branding? The form that worship takes is a very personal thing. It is that curious mix of the ritual and the new. It is both sameness and newness that helps us to authentically encounter God. I am convinced that there are many ways to experience God in worship. The key is to do it passionately! Like the prayer of Jesus, we so experience God that we know union with God through Christ! The new things that we have done in 2007 include completing our Sanctuary renovation and in introducing a new, contemplative form of our 8:30 service.

In 2008 we want to take steps to look afresh at the way we do passionate worship. We want to explore additional forms, perhaps forms that will be offered at times other than Sunday morning. We want to bring in one of the thought leaders, Marcia McFee, to

help us in that effort. Marcia is designing all the worship services for 2008 General Conference. She is an expert in emerging styles of worship that post-modern people are embracing to experience God. Marcia can help us to find new expressions of Christ's reconciliation to a lonely world. With her help we will find new ways to say to friends that we invite to Bering – "this may or may not be the place for you, but come see for yourself."