

## THE PASTOR'S POINTS

September 8, 2019

We are now back from summer vacation/break, and into what one of my professors called 'the rites of fall.' We reorganize groups, decide where we will spend our time and energy over the winter, begin to do far-ranging planning for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and often assess how we would like to do things this time around.

As a pastor, I'm constantly on the lookout for things that will help to stimulate our reflection and further response to the gospel of Christ – the way that is Truth and Life for us – the lamp for our path and light of our lives. I came across this while reading this summer – "Taking a Critical Look at Our Worship," by Methodist Bishop Will Willimon. Even if you have never heard of Willimon, you HAVE heard him! Through me – I've been reading his books and homiletic reflections for decades now – and always find him to be a thoughtful, ecumenical, sage voice.

In the article, he summarizes the research of Thomas G. Long, another great American preacher. Long had taken time off from his pulpit to study a group of vibrant churches. Long then composed a list of characteristics of churches that worship in life-giving ways, finding the following characteristics in the congregational life and worship of faithful congregations who:

1. Make room, somewhere in worship, for the experience of mystery.
2. Are very intentional about showing hospitality to the stranger.
3. Have recovered and made visible the sense of drama inherent in Christian worship.
4. Emphasize congregational music that is both excellent and eclectic in style and genre.
5. Creatively adapt the space and environment for worship.
6. Have a strong connection between worship and local mission, and this connection is expressed in every aspect of the worship service.
7. Have a relatively stable order of service and a significant repertoire of worship elements and responses that the congregation knows by heart.
8. Move to a joyous festival experience toward the end of the worship service.
9. Have strong, charismatic pastors and worship leaders.

Ultimately, worship is a gift of a Christ who reveals Himself to all who are willing to open their hearts to Him on Sundays. As Long says, "Worship is about awe, not strategy."

I fell in love with Catholic ritual and liturgy as a small child, and my enthusiasm for it does not feel to me like it has waned in 40 years as a priest. I am energized on Sundays being with you, and I am grateful for your presence and participation.

But I always come back to the statement of one of my professors. "What determines whether the liturgy in a parish is good – or not?" "Ask the folks who live in that town. If the poor are being served, if goodness and mercy and love are being extended, if it is a better place to live because of a parish, then it is good worship. If not, it's an exercise in selfish congratulations." Thank you for all you do – both at Mass and to serve our brothers and sisters.

The numbers of you who are involved here at Mass on Sundays and then in ministries throughout the week, indicates to me that you know this truth in your bones. THANK YOU for all that you do – for praying/worshiping in here – and serving out there. Together, the kingdom of God continues to be born among us. Amen. (Help from Will Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, April-June 2019, p. 2)

*Father John*