The Mother of Invention—July 16, 2017
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For reflection: “There is no life that is not lived in community and no community not lived in praise of God.” T. S. Elliot

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Psalm 111 (Psalms Now)
My heart is full today. I am so grateful for all that God has done for me. I need but crawl out of my corner of depression and self-pity and look around me to see how great my God is. I cannot see God, but I can see the works of God’s hands. God is merciful and loving. How tenderly God deals with those whose hearts are open. Our God is a righteous and faithful God. God’s promises and precepts are forever. God is majestic and powerful. God created me and sustains me day by day. God is forgiving and takes me back to a loving heart when I go astray. God is in this world today and those who recognize and accept that presence are building on foundations that are eternally secure. How grateful I am to God today!

Epistle Reading: Hebrews 12:19-25 (The Message)
So friends, we can now – without hesitation – walk right up to God in “the Holy Place.” Jesus has cleared the way by the blood of his sacrifice, acting as our priest before God. The “curtain” into God’s presence is his body. So let’s do it! – full of belief, confident that we’re presentable inside and out. Let’s keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do, but spurring each other on, especially as we see the Day approaching.

Sermon: The Mother of Invention
UCF provides a good many pastoral services to people who aren’t members – weddings, funerals, and I respond to requests for meetings about family or personal struggles without consideration of membership. In the course of getting acquainted with these folk, I usually ask them how it is that they have come here – what have they heard about us? what is their history with the congregation? etc. – in order to better understand what it is they are seeking. While it’s not the answer to the question I’ve asked, more often than not I hear a somewhat defensive response assuring me that they are good people even though they don’t come to church. My response to them is that I am sure they are. I do imagine, however, that it’s more difficult to be good people on our own rather than with the help of the church.

I thought of these encounters as I prepared for today’s sermon. I was particularly struck by one line in the Hebrews text. In the NRSV, it reads, “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds...” “...How to provoke one another...” While in the Latin “to provoke” is simply “to call forth,” in today’s English, it sounds a lot like “And let us consider how to aggravate one another...” In our society we also have other associations with something called “provocative behavior.” While neither were what the writer of Hebrews intended, the phrase remained intriguing, if challenging for contemporary understanding. I looked in other translations: The KJV also used “to provoke.” The NEV had “to spur.” The NIV had “how best to arouse,” and The Message, which I read this morning, rendered it “Let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out...”
This translation is appealing for several reasons. The word “encourage” seems consistent with the intent of the Hebrews’ letter writer. The word “inventive” seems an invitation to join in God’s creativity in bringing out the best in people. “Let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshipping together as some do, but spurring each other on, especially as we see the Day approaching.” In the Letter to the Hebrews and in every translation of it, the ability and opportunity to encourage goodness, acts of love and helpful behaviors is inextricably linked to a regular life of worship with the gathered community...

...Which brings us back to people seeking the services of the church on a highly intermittent basis, or people who tell us they worship on the golf course, or with a TV evangelist or even someone like noted spirituality author Kathleen Norris, who was finally confronted with her assumption that she was “too spiritual” to go to church.

How is it that those of us who are regular participants in worship are different (Note: I did not say “better”) than those who are not? What is it about being in worship with others that not only encourages, but in most cases, makes possible at all, acts of love and generosity?

For one thing, those of us who are in worship with the whole community get an almost weekly inoculation against cynicism, despair or fear. This week alone news stories told of: domestic murder suicides; companies stealing from those who trusted them; a traumatized population in the “freed” Mosul; people with catastrophic illness; and politicians acting for personal gain, among many other discouraging reports. In the face of such news, it’s easy to become discouraged or bitter; to see webs of conspiracy rather than God’s weaving toward wholeness. It’s easy to think we can make no difference in the world. It’s easy to reject the premise of goodness in people. At such times, to enter the sanctuary in praise of God with the people of God is not to hide from reality in a lead- (or Spirit)- lined bunker. It is not to deny that people disappoint or bad things happen. It is rather to join in the telling of the counter-cultural truth of the goodness of God and creation. To worship is not to wait to find a “It’s not all bad” news byte or the good news blurb at the end of an hour of horrific news reporting. It is to recognize that the reporting of such good news is not the brainchild of some news-marketing maven. People of faith from earliest times and the mother Church invented the telling of good news and the highlighting of good people.

To worship is to weekly spend time with people who, in spite of fear, broken trust, sometimes overwhelming odds, or grief or disappointment, for the sake of love, do make a difference, do trust, do love, and do lean toward a hopeful tomorrow. To worship is not only to be in the presence of such people, but to become such people ourselves.

We may gather as good people, but worship also reminds us that we are human. We are reminded that being human is good enough for God and good enough for the lives we lead. I recently watched a re-broadcast of the movie Seabiscuit. I was struck by a line in the movie: “You don’t throw away a whole life because one thing doesn’t work.” That line is one of the themes of our faith. From the first humans whose lives were changed but not destroyed by disobedience to God; to a murderer who led the Israelite people toward freedom in the Holy Land; to a widowed foreigner who became an ancestress to Christ; to a persecutor of Christians who became possibly the greatest of all the apostles, the story of our faith is all about making something positive and hopeful of bruised and broken, fragile, less-than-perfect human beings. Our faith makes us part of something bigger than ourselves and gives us purpose even when the world would throw us away. We gather with people who have had love betrayed and found the courage to love again; those whose lives have been bent by addiction, and have found new freedom in faith; those whose bodies have been twisted by disease, but reach out in compassion to others; those who have disappointed themselves or others; we gather with all those whose very lives give witness to the newness possible through Christ.

In worship week after week we rehearse, retell, proclaim and live the story of our faith in the cycles of confession and assurance of pardon. Week after week, we give one another courage and lift
one another up and love one another into the wholeness of a new day.

In addition to being reminded of the good nature of God and creation and restoring us to the fullness of life, there is another way that worship inventively encourages love and good deeds. Throughout the year, in the media, letters to columnists, in newsletters from high schools, various campaigns will encourage “senseless acts of kindness” efforts. For us, however, there are no such things as “senseless” acts of kindness. From the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation; from the life of the church across the centuries and into our life today, the purpose and meaning of any kindness, any self-giving act on behalf of another is clear. The ancient, present and future word of our faith is that we love because God first loved us – that we have been blessed in order that we might be a blessing. It is our call and our joy.

We who sit here this morning are the beneficiaries of hundreds of thousands, millions of people, living and dead, who looked around in worship sometime, somewhere and understood that Christ died for them each one of them individually and all of them collectively. They understood that Jesus thought the person in front of them, and behind them and the child down the hall and the one yet to be born and the little old man who waits for a visit from a neighbor were all worth dying for. And if they were worth dying for, they were worth serving and sharing and caring for. They wrote and shaped the Word of God that we might have it. They prayed and healed and taught and searched and fought that we might inherit this faith. They served and shared and built and worshiped and sang and preached and nurtured and grieved and rejoiced and baptized and nursed and gave money. Again and again they told the story of the love of God, the death of Christ and of a life together without which nothing in life makes sense.

So it is that we who are in worship are reminded who we are, whose we are and all those who have brought us to this place. We are reminded that all that we have here and at home is pure gift. We are reminded that it is our turn. It is our turn to be the good people and the good news. As has been done before us and for us, it is our turn to give, perhaps sacrificially, for heat and light and curriculum and building and music and staff and mission and education and fellowship and childcare. As has been done before us and for us, it is our turn to – teach, to sing, to worship, to pray, to visit, to rejoice, to mourn, to relate, to grow, to learn, to give time and energy. It is our turn to listen and to tell the story. It is our time to understand that of those to whom much has been given much will be asked. It is our time to acknowledge that we are some of those to whom very much has been given.

It is through our life of worship that we inventively and creatively encourage one another to acts of love and helping others. It is through worship that the light of our faith overcomes the darkness of cynicism fear or doubt. It is through worship that we keep company with saints living and dead. It is through worship that we tell, witness and perform acts of kindness that make sense of life and put flesh on the bones of love. It is through worship that we are called to take our own places in the ministry of the church and keep our obligations to the generations who have come before us and the ones yet to be born; to one another and to people we will never know. Worship is not an hour interlude before real life starts. Worship is the very stuff of life. Worship is the necessity by which the church becomes the birthplace, the cradle, the mother of invention. Worship is how the church becomes the author, narrator and cast of stories and lives that are good and whole and joyful and faithful and saintly and human.

“So let’s do it!—full of belief, confident that we’re presentable inside and out. Let’s keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. God is ever faithful. Let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do, but spurring each other on.” Let’s just do it. Amen.