

Airplane Seats and Church Pews

Frankton – 5/31/15

Scripture: Matthew 17.1-9 Christ's transfiguration

Proposition: Coming prepared to worship will allow you to be ready for God to change you.

I recently read somewhere that people sitting on an airplane seat and people sitting in a church pew have something in common. Both of those groups are on a journey. Most of them are well behaved and presentable. Some of them doze during the flight – or the sermon. Most, if not all of them, are satisfied with a predictable experience in their seats. For many of them, the description of a good flight and the description of a good worship experience are the same descriptions. People deplaning at the airport are asked about their flight and they reply, "It was a nice flight." People leaving the sanctuary are asked about their worship experience and they reply, "It was a nice worship service." Both those leaving the airplane and those leaving the sanctuary are leaving the same way they entered and they are happy to return the next time.

A few people, however, are not content with "nice." These people crave something more. Have you ever flown with a child? Some of you may remember the day, long before our current tight airport and airplane security, when a child might ask the stewardess to see the pilot in the cockpit. She would then escort the youngster up to the cockpit where the pilot would show off his airplane and give little Johnny or Janie a moment to write about in their memoirs. Picture little Johnny's face as the attendant escorts him back to his seat after his visit in the cockpit. The child's face needs to be bigger so that it can hold the smile that is stretched from one ear to the other. There is wonder in his eyes and excitement in his voice. He hardly stops to breathe as he tells his parents about his whole experience. He tells them about seeing all the gauges. He tells them about putting on the radio headset just like the pilot wear. He is just overwhelmed with his experience in the cockpit and of course when his Mom and Dad ask him what he wants to be when he grows up, he answers with no hesitation, "I want to be a pilot."

I need to remind you that the child and his parents are not the only ones on this plane. There are other passengers as well and they are all in their seats doing whatever passengers do in their seats. Picture some of the other passengers in your mind. Study their faces. Contrast those faces with that of the little boy who has just returned from his cockpit visit. No other face in that plane has as much enthusiasm on it as the face of that little boy. Most of the other faces in the plane were at best content. They were travelers who were content to be on the plane, content to be getting closer to their destination, content to be out of the airport, content to sit and stare at the ugly seat back in front of them or content to read the magazine or book they brought with them. And overall, they say very little to each other.

Of course, there were exceptions. There are the four ladies who weren't content; they were exuberant. They all appeared wearing straw hats and carrying beach bags. They giggled all the way down the aisle and down-right laughed out loud when one of them had trouble getting her beach bag into the overhead storage compartment without spilling all its contents. There was also the fellow in the dark blue business suit that sat on the aisle a few seats ahead of you. He wasn't content; he wasn't exuberant. He was pretty grouchy. He quickly and gruffly ordered a drink

from the flight attendant while he opened his laptop computer. For the entire flight, he was scowling at the computer screen acting for all the world like Dr. Seuss' the Scrooge. And then there is the gal a couple of rows behind you who isn't really content either. Neither is she exuberant nor grouchy. She's just plain petrified. She has never flown before and she now has a firm death grip on the arms of her chair and mumbling her silent prayer throughout the whole trip, "Just let this be over with Lord."

Those people are the exceptions that prove the rule. They are the extremes ends of reactions to the flight. Generally, everyone else in the cabin is somewhat more constrained than the straw-hat ladies. They are happier than the blue business suit man. And they are lots calmer than the white-knuckle flier. In a word, most of the people you can picture on the plane are content. Content with a predictable flight. Content with an uneventful flight. Content with a "nice" flight. And that is what we were seeking. We seek a predictable flight. We seek an uneventful flight. We seek a "nice" flight. And that is what we get. The little boy, on the other hand, wanted more. He wanted to see the pilot. And he got to see the pilot. If you asked him about his flight, I can almost guarantee that he would not use the word "nice" to describe his flight. He is going to use words like great and super and oh-man-awesome. He's going to show you his plastic wings and tell you, "I got to go see the pilot, the man up front."

Can you now see why people in an airplane seat and people in a church pew have a lot in common? Just enter a church sanctuary, enter this church sanctuary, and look at the faces. A few were giggly when they entered, a couple of them were cranky, but by and large, the people who entered this sanctuary and are now seated in the pews are content. Content to be here. Content to sit and look straight ahead. Content to struggle through singing the same old songs, and listening to the same old pastor. Content to leave when the service is over. They are content to enjoy a worship service with no surprises and no turbulence. They are content with a "nice" service. In Matthew 7, Jesus says: *Seek and you will find*. And since a nice service is what we seek, a nice service is usually what we find. A few however, seek more. A few come with the child-like enthusiasm of the little boy hoping to see the pilot. And those few leave as he did, their faces changed with the wide-eyed wonder of having stood in the presence of the pilot himself.

The same thing happened to Jesus. The day Jesus went to worship, his face was changed. I know you're sitting there asking, "When did Jesus go to worship." This morning's scripture tells us of a day when Jesus took the time to walk to the top of Mt. Hermon (or Mt. Tabor) and stand with three of his closest earthly friends (Peter, James and John) and be in the presence of God. On top of the mountain he spoke with Moses and Elijah. Jesus face changed in appearance. Then God showed up and spoke: *This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him.* [5]

The words that Matthew wrote presuppose a decision on the part of Jesus to stand in the presence of God. He didn't awaken one morning, look at the calendar, check his watch and say, "Oops, today is the day we go to the mountain." No. He had preparations to make. Ministry to all those other people was suspended so ministry to his heart could occur. Let me repeat that: ministry to all those other people was suspended so ministry to his heart could occur. Since his chosen place of worship was some distance away, he had to select the right path and stay on the right road. By the time he was on the mountain, his heart was ready. In short, I'm trying to say that Jesus prepared for worship.

I want to ask you something: Do you do the same? Do you prepare for worship? The question may seem foreign to you, but my hunch is that many of us simply “wake up, get up, and show up”. I think many in our Christian culture today are sadly casual when it comes to meeting God. Would we be so casual if we were meeting the President of the United States? Would you collect your thoughts? Would you think about the questions you want to ask him? The arguments for your side of the issue? Would you think about proper etiquette to meet the President? Wouldn't you prepare for your meeting with the President? Of course you would. That begs the question: should we prepare any less for an encounter with the one-and-only creator of the universe?

Do you come and sit in the church pews with a worship-hungry heart? Or do you come and sit in them like you do an airplane seat – content with nice. Jesus came that day on the mountain worship hungry. And he didn't go away disappointed. May I urge you to be just like Jesus? Prepare your heart for worship. Pray before you come so you will be ready to pray to the Great Comforter when you arrive. Sleep before you come so you'll stay alert to God's presence after you get here. Read God's Word before you come so that your heart will be open when you come to worship the one who inspired the word. Come hungry for an encounter with God. Come willing to listen to God because you come expecting God to speak. Come asking as you walk through the door, “Can I see the pilot today?” just like the little boy on the airplane did. And maybe when you leave, you'll leave like he did – with wide-eyed wonder.