

# Does God Really Love Me Just I As I Am?

As the pastor of Middle Collegiate Church in New York City, I think about what the people who come to church are asking and what they bring with them to Middle Church on Sunday morning. But prior questions that come to mind are:

How am I listening?

How do I know what the people are bringing with them?

Where do I have significant contact with Middle's worshiping congregation?

I find myself **intentionally listening** before the worship celebrations, during MiddleLink—a time for refreshments and conversation following worship, at staff and board meetings, in small groups, during programs, in informal social contacts with the Middle Church community, during new-member groups, and in notes, cards, e-mails, and website responses. For this essay, I chose to focus more intensely upon one important listening opportunity: the hour or so prior to the worship celebrations.

When I was in college, I stayed every weekend for a couple of months at the home of a very accomplished pastor. I observed carefully his Sunday morning style. He got up early, went to the church for a couple of hours to make final prepa-

rations on his sermon, came home for a leisurely breakfast at 8:30, read the morning paper, went back to the church at 10:30, put on his formal black robe with the appropriate liturgical stole, and entered the sanctuary during the opening hymn. The details may differ from per-

*I tell the people to bring their whole selves into the sanctuary with them: all their joys, sorrows, struggles, happiness, failures, successes, sexual orientations, gender, age, culture, anxieties, questions, doubts, and work... we should lift our whole selves up to a forgiving, loving, accepting, welcoming God.*

son to person, but over the years I have noticed many other clergy model similar Sunday morning rituals. They walk into the pulpit having little contact with the people in the pews before they lead worship and preach. That is very different from my own style. I get up early, go to the church, work on the sermon and the

Gordon R. Dragt

worship celebration until 8:30, and from 8:30 to 10:15 I involve myself in the rehearsals of choirs, the jazz band, instrumentalists, dancers, the puppet theater, and worship leaders, listening to all the diverse conversations of the people preparing for and anticipating the worship celebration. At 10:15 I put on my informal bright-red celebrative and festive robe and walk among the pews, greeting, laughing, embracing, talking with people and listening to what they are bringing with them into that Sunday's worship celebration. For me, those forty-five minutes are the most precious and sacred moments of the whole week. What I hear during that time is fresh, immediate, unfiltered, and shared at the very moment the people are expecting and anticipating the worship.

When I begin leading the celebration, I am literally and spiritually filled with the thoughts, yearnings, embraces, hopes, joys, sorrows, laughter, illnesses, and concerns of the people of the congregation. The words I speak, the prayers I pray, and the announcements I give have all been affected by those conversations, greetings, and brief moments of sharing with the people before the worship celebration begins.

I encourage Middle's ministry staff to do the same. Meeting, talking with, and listening to the worshipping congregation are minimum job requirements at Middle Church. Under our concept of ministry, no one can hole up in her or his office and do her or his job in isolation from one another and from the members and participants of the congregation.

During that important time before the worship celebration begins, I hear people wondering about relevant answers to who God is, who Jesus is, and who they are within their new "re-churched" environment. And there are always prayer requests, reports of illness, announcements of new relationships and happy events. But one idea or thought captures my attention more than any of the others: "God loves me, too! I need to hear that." That message is communicated in so many different ways. Here are a few of them:

*I am so happy that I am being welcomed as a member of Middle Church today, because Sunday morning here touches so positively the very same part of my soul where I once pointed to and said, "I feel so empty and so hollow and it hurts right here."*

*I remember the very first time I came here. A Black woman stood up. She was in a robe, speaking from the pulpit, welcoming all and thanking God for loving all people and inviting us all to come and worship together. From my White, middle-class, strict religious background, the statements were beautiful and absurd. I thought to myself, "These are the words I've been waiting to hear for years!"*

*I show up here on Sunday mornings because I finally feel in touch with my joy about being a Christian! I've felt very unworthy most of my life, since I've mostly had the view of God as*

*that of a stern parent set out to scold me for being such a bad child. I'm finally getting to a point where I appreciate—even love—myself, and my view of God has changed, too. So showing up on Sunday mornings is for me, with this brand-new joy I possess, like some sort of spiritual "Christmas morning" every week, and I'm not only like a child again but God's child and God accepts me!*

*I think for most of my life I have been searching for my spiritual center, you know? What is God? How can I live God? I have found that the fellowship experienced here in a welcoming, accepting, searching community provides the greatest support for my spiritual journey.*

*It has been a joy and a surprise to discover this church community of welcome, acceptance, love, and care right in the middle of this enormous city of New York.*

*As the years have passed, my friends have become spread across the country and around the world. I don't have many opportunities to meet new people, and I am by nature fearful of such situations. Middle is a place where I feel safe and comfortable in meeting people, making friends, and exploring and nurturing my spiritual life.*

*The worship celebrations are important to me. The music, the sermon, the prayer, the teaching, the closeness of other believers, the diversity of the congregation, the whole event feeds my soul. Almost always, when I leave here, I feel full.*

*Thank you for your inspiring message last week. You brought tears to my eyes. For all my life I have struggled against traditions that seek to deny women an equal place and a sense of justice in their world. It warms my heart to hear you speak new words of acceptance and welcome. Thank you for giving me hope and for renewing my faith that all things are possible.*

*It sure is refreshing to hear a pastor struggle and wrestle with the very same faith questions and doubts that I have, instead of one who gives the appearance of having all the answers.*

*After all the years of feeling guilty, sinful, and punished by God, I finally feel like God accepts me and loves me as a gay person. God loves me, too. I need to hear that.*

When I was growing up in the church, I got the impression that we were to leave our worldly thoughts, concerns, and issues at the door and enter the sanctuary with only spiritual thoughts and concerns. Of course, that never worked. As soon as I sat down or closed my eyes to pray, I immediately began to think about all the stuff I left at the door. Today, I tell the people to bring their whole selves into the sanctuary with them: all their joys, sorrows, struggles, happiness, failures, successes, sexual orientations, gender, age, culture, anxieties, questions, doubts, and work. Don't leave any of

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**Village of New York City, and he has led this congregation in a remarkable turnaround in membership and mission. The changes at Middle Church were the subject of an article in the *New York Times*.**



it outside. Bring it all inside. Lift it all up; we should lift our whole selves up to a forgiving, loving, accepting, welcoming God.

A large core of Middle's members are "dechurched" people between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five. At one point in their lives they used to be a part of a church, but left church behind and now find themselves wanting to reenter, but are often afraid of not being welcomed. It

is not surprising that what I hear most from people on Sunday mornings is the joy of experiencing unconditional welcome and acceptance by God and by a church community. Something else I hear over and over again is that people are searching for not just another church community, but a diverse congregation in age, culture, race, sexual orientation, economics, interests, and beliefs. I regularly

include into my preaching themes derived from what I hear.

A person does not have to attend Middle for very many weeks to understand that we believe God's number one priority is welcome and acceptance, and that it does not happen here by chance or by accident. Middle is very intentionally, purposefully, and intensely directed to being a diverse congregation—a welcoming and including church community. Unity at Middle is represented in its diversity, not in similarities of race, sexual orientation, economics, age, denomination, theology, liturgy, or doctrine. At Middle Church, diversity is positive, sameness is negative. People coming to Middle want to associate with and learn from people who are different from themselves. They tried asking their questions, seeking answers, and growing spiritually with people who all look and believe the same and it didn't work. They are now excited about seeking community, asking their questions, and exploring their spirituality within diversity. Our message here is that no matter what people and society and the church may say, God says, "You are welcome!" There is no limit to God's love.

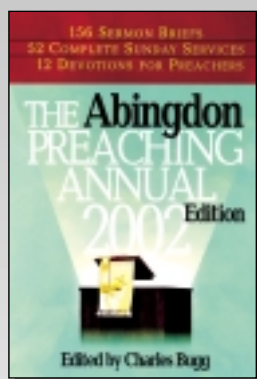
Alfred Tennyson wrote these great words to the second verse of a hymn, "Incarnate God, Immortal Love":

Our little systems have their day;  
they have their day and cease to be;  
they are but fleeting certainty, and  
you, O Christ, are more than they.

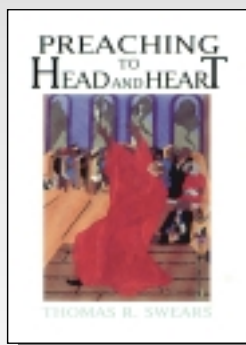
Sometimes I think we too easily forget that Christ is more than our own little systems. Christ is more than our limited traditions. Christ is more than our narrow doctrines and childhood experiences. Christ is more than our restricted biblical interpretations that are often used to determine who in the church is "in" and who is "out." Christ calls us to a larger, greater task of being welcoming, generous, accepting, and celebrative people in what we do and say. That is the very heart and soul of the gospel message I preach at Middle Church, my direct response to what people bring with them into the worship celebrations here. □

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