



May 22, 2015

Chapel at The Geneva School: Turning Towards Faith & Practice

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Have you ever wondered why our school chapels are the way they are? Why do we recite prayers and ancient affirmations of faith? Why do we sing hymns and psalms? Why do we sit to hear lessons from the Old Testament, and stand when the Gospel is read? With a school population as diverse as ours in terms of church affiliation, would it not be worthwhile and perhaps more honest of us to survey a variety of worship styles, and perhaps more accurately reflect the student and faculty population? These are good questions, and I would like to provide the beginnings of what will hopefully be a thoughtful response.

To begin, we need to clarify what our school chapel is not. It is not a church service. There are elements to our school chapel that are commonly found in church services, to be sure. But we are a school, and not a church. We do not have the authority of the church and its governance and cannot claim the same blessings of communion and fellowship that can only be known within the context of the local church. So how should we think about our school chapel? To work towards an answer to that question, I would like for us to take a brief detour and visit a few other spheres within our school walls that I believe will be helpful to us.

Consider first the Kindergarten Center Room at the Early Childhood Campus. It is in this wonderful space where the students can play with concepts they have been learning about in the classroom. During the unit on “Community” the Center Room is set up to resemble a small town. Students can visit the Post Office to mail a letter to a friend, or make a financial transaction at the Bank. Are the students running a real post office and bank? No; but they are learning very real concepts about how our postal and banking services operate.

Travel now with me to the science class. Our good science teachers know it is not enough to simply lecture and discuss concepts with students. Labs are created, whereby students can enter into and observe firsthand the principles in question, expanding not just the content of knowledge but the very way of knowing. Dissecting a pig does not qualify you as a surgeon; but it does pave the way in your understanding and appreciation of anatomy.

The final stop on our detour is the phrase “best practices.” A best practice is a method or technique that has over time consistently demonstrated superior results. As educators we try to be thoughtful about using best practices in our classrooms. At a school like ours we are not particularly concerned with the most recent and trending practices. Rather, we cast our eye across the breadth of history and attempt to use those educational practices that have stood the test of time.

I would suggest that chapel functions in the life of the school in much the same way as the Kindergarten Center Room and the science labs. There is an opportunity afforded to us in chapel to exercise some of the corporate actions that historically have been distinctly Christian. In planning chapel services, we ask, “What are some of the actions that Christians throughout the ages have engaged in when gathered together, and what is the potential for how these actions might affect us?” Rather than surveying current trends in American worship styles, our focus is aimed more at discovering and sharing with students what could be considered “best practices” of Christian worship from the past several hundred years. In the words of Ken Meyer, we are not so concerned about “making the Tradition relevant to us, but making ourselves relevant to the Tradition.”

Chapel at The Geneva School is loosely based upon a service called Morning Prayer, which has its roots in the 1549 Book of the Common Prayer, created from the multiple service books of the medieval English Church by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer and others. The discipline and practice of Morning (and Evening) Prayer not only fits into the basic rhythm of nature, but occurred publicly in the early church before the development of monasticism and the multiplication of daily services. (It is worth noting that Christians in the early church were taking their cues from the Jewish traditions of prayer which permeated everyday life together.) In the sixteenth century, at the Protestant Reformation, the Church of England abandoned the medieval monastic model of many daily services. It returned to the discipline of two services daily, making these available for all Christians, clergy and laity alike. The simple takeaway of all of this is that over the centuries, Christians have had a way of beginning their day which involved praying to God.

The content of Morning Prayer is primarily portions of the Christian Bible. There are readings from the Old and New Testaments, the praying of Psalms, and the offering of prayers, whose very language is often a medley of biblical phrases. In our chapels, we elect to add a homily, or instructive teaching, as well as various hymns and anthems as are appropriate. It is not uncommon for us to enjoy a breadth of music in a single chapel service that spans millennia, from early hymnographers to contemporary composers. In this way, we strive to model that the history of the Church is a living history, taken up by the Apostles, passed on to faithful followers, defended by the martyrs, and laid at the threshold of our lives today.

It is an important thing to note that the entirety of our chapel is considered as prayer. Christian worship throughout time has been understood as a dramatic dialogue between God and his people. Thinking of Christian worship as prayer, from beginning to end, provides an essential framework for understanding the interaction of the various bits and pieces and how they relate to one another.

Jaroslav Pelikan, one of the great Christian scholars and historians of the twentieth century, had a favorite quote by Goethe, and I believe it provides a poetic summary of what motivates and animates our school chapel program:

What you have received as heritage, take now as task and thus you will make it your own.