

MUSINGS FROM THE BENCH (this time not the organ bench, but a regular old pew)

It is very rare that I simply attend worship as a “regular” person, not involved in leading the service in some way, so it’s an experience I treasure, look forward to and make careful choices about. I had heard at a conference that there was a certain church in Oak Park that is THE place to go to experience Taizé worship done right. The service was held only once a month on Friday evening at 7:30, so I had to wait for the right date, then get there early enough to get a good seat. To get a good seat, be there by 6:30, I was advised, and to get any seat at all, 7:00 would do. Mark wanted to come too, but was teaching downtown that day – meaning insufficient time for him to get home then drive to the church with me. I devised a plan in which he would take the “L” west and I would drive, taking a route that would cross the appropriate L line, picking him up so we could drive the rest of the way together. Traffic was beastly, and despite no place to park, the rendezvous succeeded, and at 6:15 we arrived at the church – an old stone edifice, crumbling here and there, but with a commanding presence. We selected a seat about half way back on the left. The rows around us filled steadily, and we hadn’t been sitting there long when a man came and sat next to me in the pew, saying hello and flashing a big smile when he arrived.

A few minutes before the service was to begin, the music director came out to teach the congregation a few of the songs to be used in the service. I had heard this was the practice here, and I was eager to observe how the songs were taught and how people responded. I also felt a responsibility to help with the singing since I could sight-read the music and I’m a good singer. The cantor sang a phrase of the first song, asking the congregation to repeat it. As directed, with my clear alto voice I sang “*Laudate omnes gentes.*” I heard Mark singing softly to my right, and on my left I heard a loud, tuneless, toneless voice. The sound grated on my ears. It was ugly. I had been waiting several weeks to attend this service, had battled traffic, had gotten there 75 minutes early, and I was seated next to a tone-deaf man in a service comprised largely of congregational singing. And despite his vocal shortcomings, he was an enthusiastic participant. I looked around. Finding another seat in the packed church wasn’t even a remote possibility. “There are nearly a thousand people here,” I thought, “many of whom probably sing wonderfully, or at least more softly. How can it be that I’ve ended up next to this man?”

I will do my best to ignore him, I decided, but as the service got started, I couldn’t. He sang with gusto. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye from time to time. He was completely absorbed in the service, oblivious to everything but singing those songs. I started to wish that I could be completely absorbed in the service, too. I made a conscious effort to relax and focus on the words of the songs. Before long, I was fully engaged in worship. Part way through the service, it was time to light candles by passing the flame from one lighted taper to another. When my candle was lit, I turned to my tone-deaf friend to light his candle. I looked into his face and smiled. A few moments later, we both walked up the aisle to put our candles in the holders by the altar, singing all the while, rounded tones and ragged tones weaving into the canopy of music created by a thousand voices caught up in the holiness of the moment and the palpable sense of the presence of God. It didn’t matter anymore that my pew-mate couldn’t sing according to my musician’s definition. The spirit and the freedom with which he offered his voice and his heart was an unself-conscious act of worship and devotion. His singing was beautiful to the ears of God. And I felt humbled and grateful to be seated next to him.