

**SLD08.21.11 10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sacred Communities - Taize**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 16:13-20**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**Introduction**

This morning many elements of our worship come from the Taize Community in France, the next “sacred community” we’re exploring in this summer sermon series.

In contrast to the often anemic participation in our own monthly Taize services, the community of Taize is actually one of the world's most important sites of Christian pilgrimage. Each year over 100,000 young people make pilgrimages to Taize for prayer, Bible study, sharing and communal work. Young pilgrims from all over the world flock to the small village of Taize in central France to share in the community’s way of life.<sup>1</sup> And the community’s way of life is one of simplicity, ecumenism, and hospitality, of shared worship and work and study.

Prayer and silence are at the heart of the Taize experience, as is the singing of distinctive and much-repeated prayer chants. Taize music highlights simple phrases, usually lines from the Psalms or other pieces of scripture, that are repeated for a time in order to help with meditation and prayer. Using just a few words, these chants express the basic fundamentals of faith in a manner quickly grasped by the mind. As the words are sung over many times, their reality gradually penetrates the whole being. Meditative singing thus becomes a way of listening to God, of praying and remaining together in attentive waiting on God.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/priests/taize\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/priests/taize_1.shtml)

<sup>2</sup> Brother Alois, *Letter from Kolkata*

One of the 100 brothers who anchor the Taize Community notes the three dimensions of prayer at Taize which he believes especially appeal to the young people drawn there. Prayer at Taize is accessible, meditative, and of the heart.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the founder of Taize, Brother Roger, was concerned that nothing in the prayer should appear inaccessible. Prayer should never be too long, too complicated, too wordy. Rather it should be simple, invitational, heartfelt but also gently drawing one beyond one's self.

Remarked Paul Ricoeur, the Protestant philosopher visited Taize frequently before his death in 2005 at the age of 92:

"We are overwhelmed by a flood of words, by polemic, by the assault of the virtual, which today create a kind of opaque zone. But goodness is deeper than the deepest evil, and we have to liberate that certainty, to give it a language. And the language given at Taizé is not the language of philosophy, or even of theology, but the language of the liturgy," a language that attests to goodness as a response not only to evil but also to meaninglessness."<sup>4</sup>

The quiet repetition of sung prayer is meant to open the heart to direct access to God's Word, enabling one to interiorize the words, to engrave them on one's heart so that later, when these words are rediscovered by reading them in scripture, they can be illuminated with an unexpected light.

In today's loud, bright, fast-paced world, extended silence isn't easy for anyone. But the young people who come to worship at Taize seem surprisingly open and willing to experience an extended silence in the middle of worship, describing it variously as a

---

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article3148.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article3148.html)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article102.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article102.html)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/priests/taize\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/priests/taize_1.shtml)

<sup>6</sup> Brother Alois, *Letter from Kolkata*

time to “take stock,” “listen to your heart,” “think about your problems,” “empty your mind,” “take a break,” “do some soul-searching,” “drop your masks.”

This morning we won't be including the 15 minute silence that is always a part of our monthly Taize service. But I hope those of you who haven't experienced extended communal silence will come try it sometime at our Taize Worship, which is always on the first Monday evening of the month (except for the first Monday of next month which will be Labor Day.)

### **Confessional Sequence**

In the Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful 10

### **Passing of the Peace**

### **Announcements**

### **J&C**

### **Prayers of the People**

### **Pouring the Water of Baptism**

### **Scripture Reading Matthew 16:13-20**

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

## **Meditation**

It all started back in 1940 when, at the age of twenty-five, a young Protestant man who became known as Brother Roger left Switzerland, the country where he was born, to go and live in France, the country his mother came from, with a vague idea to start a community.

When the Second World War began, the small village of Taize where Brother Roger settled, was quite close to the demarcation line dividing France in two. He decided to offer shelter for refugees fleeing war. He asked one of his sisters, Genevieve, to come and help him offer hospitality. Among the refugees they sheltered were fleeing Jews.

In the autumn of 1942, being warned that their activities had been discovered, Brother Roger and Genevieve fled to Geneva while the Gestapo took over their home. In 1944 when the war had ended they were able to return to Taize. In the post-war years, the community received mainly war orphans and former German prisoners-of-war who were interned nearby.

Gradually other young men came to join the original group of brothers, and on Easter Day 1949, seven of them committed themselves to a life together of simplicity, celibacy, prayer, and hospitality.<sup>5</sup> Today the Taize community is an ecumenical monastic order comprised of about 100 brothers from both Protestant and Catholic traditions, and from about 30 countries.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article6526.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article6526.html)

<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiz%C3%A9\\_Community](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiz%C3%A9_Community)

In the 1960's young people began to visit the Taize community. From 1962 on, brothers from Taize began, with great discretion, frequently to visit the countries of Eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup>

In 1970, in response to student protests taking place all over Europe and the world, as well as the Second Vatican Council, Brother Roger announced a "Council of Youth," whose main meeting took place at Taize in 1974. By the end of the 1970's, Taize meetings and surrounding activities began to be referred to as a "Pilgrimage of Trust on Earth," and the community decided permanently to shift its focus on youth, whom they regarded as pilgrims to sent back from youth meetings to their local churches.

After his visit to Taize in 1968, Pope John Paul II wrote that "one passes through Taize as one passes close to a spring of water. The traveler stops, quenches his thirst and continues on his way. "The brothers of the community, you know, do not want to keep you." he said. "What they want is to enable you, through prayer and silence to drink the living water promised by Christ, to know Christ's joy, to discern Christ's presence, to respond to Christ's call, and then to set out again to witness to Christ's love, and serve your brothers and sisters in your parishes, schools, universities, and places of work."<sup>8</sup>

A recent blogger about Taize noted the astute nature of the decision taken early in the life of the Taize community to focus on young people (15-29 year olds) and separate them from adults. (As an adult you can come only once a year and there are limited spaces.) One of the brothers interviewed by the blogger suggested that one

---

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article6525.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article6525.html)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article6718.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article6718.html)

reason separation of the youth from the adults is helpful is that older people are often keen to give young people “the answers,” and that, in fact, it is crucial, he said, “that young people make their own journey to their own answers.” The brother also noted, however, the importance of the presence of more mature Christians to give depth to the young people’s experience.

At the same time, with primary accommodations limited to Quonset hut-like tents with towering bunk beds, and sitting on the floor the primary arrangement available during the three daily worship services, and possibly the worst food in the cuisine-conscious country of France, Taize is definitively structured to remain culturally young.<sup>9</sup>

And, sure enough, for a nominal cost young people come to stay at Taize for a week, from Sunday to Sunday. As mentioned, living conditions are extremely simple. In fact, for summer and high holidays people generally have to bring their own tents.

A variety of programs is available according to age. But each day all participants attend three worship services, small groups led by the brothers for introductory Bible study, and workshops, *and* pitch in with chores around the campus. It’s the young people themselves who are responsible for the clean-up and maintenance of the living areas as well as each of the three meals served, which perhaps explains why they are so bad.

Back twelve or thirteen years ago this church generously sent me to Taize, a trip I enjoyed very much, at least once I recovered from having all my money stolen while I slept on the subway from the airport to Paris. Still, take it from me, if you’re over 26 or so, choose a bed and breakfast in nearby Cluny over the bunkbeds and bilge of Taize.

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://ruthmaxey.wordpress.com/taize/>

What draws young people to Taize, however, is not its accommodations but the authenticity at its heart. Taize invites young people to a personal and communal experience of faith without any expectation of an intellectual faith commitment. That is, it offers belonging before believing. *It offers belonging before believing.*

“Yes, but isn’t this the gospel?” asks one of the brothers. “Doesn’t Jesus begin simply by saying “follow me?” It’s only much later that he asks, “who do you say that I am?”” notes the brother.

“This is a generation that values experience over much else, and Taize offers an experience of faith without any immediate expectation that you sign up for a belief system. It says, “come and try.” “Come and see.” How you formulate your beliefs is secondary.”

I’ve been noticing something of a shift of this nature in my own theology, and in our own community. “Come and try. Come and see. Come and experience us here at Emory Church. How you formulate your beliefs is secondary.” Belonging before believing. Still, for membership we require certain doctrinaire statements:

Do you do from the ways of sin  
and renounce evil and its power in the world?

Do you turn toward Jesus Christ  
and accept him as your Lord and Savior?

Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple,  
obeying his Word and showing his love?

I found myself speculating how these questions might change if our focus were like Taize’s, more on authentic relationship with God, self and community than on how one expresses one’s personal beliefs at any given moment? Dare we really trust faith

to be more “caught” than “taught?” Imagine if these were the questions we asked of new members:

Do you promise to be honest with yourself, with God and with this community?  
Will you do your best to take care of yourself?  
Will you help take care of others?  
Will you strive to keep an open heart even when you’re disappointed or pissed off?  
Will you pray for this community of seekers?  
Will you do what you can to help out?

Hmmm. “Belonging before believing.” It’s an interesting idea.

Sure works for Taize, whose reach extends well beyond its little village in Burgundy. Each year around New Years the brothers organize an annual meeting in a large European city which attracts tens of thousands of young people. Since 2006, these international gatherings have extended to India, Africa and Australia. And, in fact, on May 25<sup>th</sup> of 2012, the first international gathering of Taize will take place here in the United States, at DePaul University in Chicago.

Regrettably, almost exactly six years ago, at the age of 90, Brother Roger was fatally stabbed during evening prayer by a mentally ill woman. His legacy, however, lives on. The current prior of Taize, Brother Alois, notes that “Brother Roger liked to recall that we cannot understand everything about the gospel, but the important thing is to put into practice the few words we *have* understood. This can be enough to change our life.”<sup>10</sup>

Putting into practice the few things we *have* understood about the gospel. This is Taize’s witness to Christ Jesus, its challenge to the world, and its way of helping young people ask themselves, “Who do *you* say that Jesus is?”

To the glory of God. Amen.

---

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article12759.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article12759.html)