

Gordon Atkinson, pastor of
Covenant Baptist Church in San Antonio, TX

Not for Lightweights

Mon, 06/01/2009 - 16:48

Last Sunday was the 4th of 13 in my sabbatical time. Each of them is precious to me. Each week I am choosing a place and a way to worship. I'm not a church tourist, hoping to see new things. I'm seeking spiritual experiences. I want to worship. Saturday night Jeanene and I still hadn't decided where to go. I experienced something common to our culture but new to me. The "Where do you want to go to church - I don't know where do YOU want to go to church" conversation. I found the Saint Anthony the Great website. It's an Orthodox church that has beautiful Byzantine art in the sanctuary. We decided to go there.

Shelby and Lillian went with us. On the way we warned them that this was going to be different. "They might not have changed their worship service much in a thousand years or so," I told the girls.

That was an understatement.

Saint Anthony the Great isn't just old school. It's "styli and wax tablets" old school. We arrived ten minutes early for worship and the room was already filled with people lighting candles and praying. There was one greeter. I said, "We don't know what to do." She handed me a liturgy book and waved us inside.

Pews? We don't need no stinking pews! Providing seats for worshipers is SO 14th century. Gorgeous Byzantine art, commissioned from a famous artist in Bulgaria. Fully robed priests with censers (those swinging incense thingies). Long, complex readings and chants that went on and on and on. And every one of them packed full of complex, theological ideas. It was like they were ripping raw chunks of theology out of ancient creeds and throwing

them by the handfuls into the congregation. And just to make sure it wasn't too easy for us, everything was read in a monotone voice and at the speed of an auctioneer.

I heard words and phrases I had not heard since seminary. Theotokos, begotten not made, Cherubim and Seraphim borne on their pinions, supplications and oblations. It was an ADD kids nightmare. Robes, scary art, smoking incense, secret doors in the Iconostas popping open and little robed boys coming out with golden candlesticks, chants and singing from a small choir that rolled across the curved ceiling and emerged from the other side of the room where no one was singing. The acoustics were wild. No matter who was speaking, the sound came out of everywhere. There was so much going on I couldn't keep up with all the things I couldn't pay attention to.

Lillian was the first to go down. After half an hour of standing, she was done. Jeanene took her over to a pew on the side wall. She slumped against Jeanene's shoulder and stared at me with this stunned, rather betrayed look on her face.

"How could you have brought us to this insane place?"

Shelby tried to tough it out. We were following along in the 40 page liturgy book that was only an abbreviation of the service were were experiencing. I got lost no less than 10 times. After 50 minutes Shelby leaned over and asked how much longer the service would be. I was trying to keep from locking my knees because my thighs had gotten numb. I showed her the book. We were on page 15. I flipped through the remaining 25 pages to show her how much more there was. Her mouth fell open.

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. And I think there's supposed to be a sermon in here somewhere."

“They haven’t done the SERMON yet? What was that guy doing who said all that stuff about... all that stuff?”

“I don’t know?” I said.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she said. I looked around and saw the door at the back of the sanctuary swinging shut.

And then there was one.

I made it through the entire 1 hour and 50 minutes of worship without sitting down, but my back was sore. Shelby came back toward the end. When it came time for communion I suggested that we not participate because I didn't know what kind of rules they have for that. We stayed politely at the back. A woman noticed and brought some of the bread to us, bowing respectfully as she offered it. Her gesture of kindness to newcomers who were clearly struggling to understand everything was touching to me.

Okay, so I started crying a little. So what? You would have too, I bet.

After it was over another woman came to speak with us. She said, “I noticed the girls were really struggling with having to stand.”

“Yeah,” I said. “This worship is not for lightweights.”

She laughed and said, "yes," not the least bit ashamed or apologetic.

So what did I think about my experience at Saint Anthony the Great Orthodox Church?

I LOVED IT. Loved it loved it loved it loved it loved it.

In a day when user-friendly is the byword of everything from churches to software, here was worship that asked something of me. No, DEMANDED something of me.

“You don’t know what Theotokos means? Get a book and read about it. You have a hard time standing for 2 hours? Do some sit ups and get yourself into worship shape. It is the Lord our God we worship here, mortal. What made you think you could worship the Eternal One without pain?”

See, I get that. That makes sense to me. I had a hard time following the words of the chants and liturgy, but even my lack of understanding had something to teach me.

“There is so much for you to learn. There is more here than a person could master in a lifetime. THIS IS BIGGER THAN YOU ARE. Your understanding is not central here. These are ancient rites of the church. Stand with us, brother, and you will learn in time. Or go and find your way to an easier place if you must. God bless you on that journey. We understand, but this is the way we do church.”

I’m going back again on Sunday. I started to write, “I’m looking forward to it.” But that’s not right. I’m feeling right about it.

And feeling right is what I'm looking for.

Saint Anthony the Great part 2

Wed, 06/03/2009 - 15:53 | rlp

Sunday I went back to Saint Anthony the Great. Jeanene and the girls did other things, which was fine with me because I was wanting to keep my thoughts tuned to my experience and prayer. I love my children, but when they are with me there is always a piece of me that is keeping tabs on them.

I was so excited too. Really very happy to be there and hopeful that perhaps the Eternal Creator might have something for his imperfect child to learn that day. Saint Anthony the Great has a coffee and conversation hour after the service, so I planned to stay for that as

well.

The first week I was very interested in the candles that the faithful lit and put in boxes of sand near several of the icons. These were little tapered candles that burned down, conveniently, about the time the service was over. I asked the greeter if I might light a candle. She was surprised and seemed very happy. "Yes, of course," she said. She told me that the candles represented the light of Christ coming into the world. I feel that piece of faith is held in common with our church as well. We light candles for the same reason.

I took my candle down front and prayed that I would be open to hearing from the Spirit of God during worship. I placed my candle with the others lit by various pilgrims at worship. For the entire service I kept an eye on my candle as it burned softly until it was only a tiny stub.

This week I decided not to spend any of my energy trying to keep up with the service in the liturgy book. Instead I wanted to watch everything and hear as much as I could. I found that I was able to follow the chants much better with only one week's experience under my belt. I fell in love with the sound of them. Various readers have different tones and particular styles. Everyone calls the pastor "Father" at Saint Anthony the Great. Father's voice came singing out from behind the Iconostas during the service. His voice is very resonant, and he has his own particular way of ending a phrase. There is a step down in tone and then - just at the end - he lets the tone trail off even further. Dum dum dum dum dooooooo... eeee.

I am easily hypnotized by repetitive and interesting sounds. Once in college I was driven to a state of absolute peace by the sound of a woman cutting thick paper with a heavy set of scissors. SniiiiiiiiUP. I closed my books and sat there with my head in my hands until she finished whatever she was doing. I felt like I'd had a full massage.

I think a lot of my peace on Sunday came from the simple fact that I

didn't have to understand everything. I was not the minister or anyone with a burden of comprehending the whole. I was one of God's little ragamuffins, a kid who wandered in from the street. No one expected much of me, and I felt God would be pleased if I just stood quietly and enjoyed the sounds and the beauty while being mindful of God's presence.

This week I noticed people sitting down during the homily. A number of people dropped to the ground like the crowds around Jesus. I sat down with them, and let me tell you that after standing for an hour, a seat on the floor is more comforting and comfortable than the softest lounge chair in the world. Ahh, the floor. A chance to rest my back before the push to the end of the service. Blissful.

And then it was over. It seemed much too soon. I was a bit surprised that almost 2 hours had passed. I sat at the back and watched everyone file forward to greet Father, who hugged people and chatted. I got to wander around and look more closely at some of the icons too. Stunningly beautiful.

During coffee hour I had a delightful chat with an enthusiastic woman named Tina, who became an Orthodox Christian 15 years earlier. She knew a lot of church history. It was nice chatting with her. Some others came to say hello as well. In time it came out that I am a Baptist minister on sabbatical, which was surprising for them. But just for a moment. Everyone has a story about how they arrived at Saint Anthony the Great. That was my story. And it was okay.