

Growing in Community

Acts 2:42-47

Saint Mark PC

One of the best Church conferences I ever went to was held at Walt Disney world in Orlando. Not just because we got to go to the parks and all, (though we did)but really because it was sponsored by the Disney Institute along with a very contemporary Lutheran church called Community Church of Joy in Arizona.

At the beginning of the conferece, we heard two stories that stick with me.

First, the consultant with the Disney Institute told a story about a family who came to Disney world to celebrate their daughter's birthday. They were at one of the expensive on-site hotels. And on the day of her birthday, they were heading out the door to go see one of the parks. The mom pretended she had forgotten something in the room, and snuck back in and left a note for the housekeeper. The note just asked if they could find a birthday card for their daughter and leave it in the room for when they returned.

Well the family spent the day at the park, and when they returned, not only was there a card signed by Mickey, but the room was covered in streamers and balloons, stuffed animals on the beds, and a giant sign that said Happy Birthday, love Mickey.

That hotel staff, had gone out of their way to make a memorable moment for that family.

And the Disney Institute used this apocrophal story to illustrate that in doing so, they likely gained a life long devoted follower. A family who I am betting will

gladly pay the exorbitant prices that Disney charges for their hotels, parks and food.

The second story was told by the pastor of the church in the conference. A woman named Barb came to the church one Sunday. She was never an active church goer. She had a baby and wanted to have him baptized. But she also had a kind of eating disorder, and feared going to any church because she would be shamed and called a failure in life. Instead she heard messages of God's love and care. She was invited to participate in activities and ministries of the church.

Her child was baptized. Her heart was so captured, she decided to be baptized herself. She was not judged. She began to get her life in order and believes that it was the inviting inclusive messages that helped her to become a part of that community.

So the one thing both of those stories have in common is the word hospitality. We have talked about growing in contentment, and worship and prayer, but this World Communion Sunday asks us to think about growing in hospitality and community.

Just think for a moment about the word hospitality. It has the same roots as the words host, hospice, hotel - the word means to most of us an environment where someone feel s like a valued gust, included, welcomed in a home or in a community.

If you have experienced hospitality, you don't soon forget it. Maybe some of us have a similar experience to this - I have 4 older brothers and sisters, all with children and now some with grandchildren. When my mother was still living, at her house would be a summer gathering, and I remember her in the kitchen trying to count up in her head how many would be there for dinner?

Would the others be back from the park or the pool in time? Would they bring spouses or friends?

So, my mother would plan for about 24 and then she said what she always did:

"You know there always room for one more"

DO we create an environment in our lives or in our church of being in community, ready to welcome one more?

Remember that family who had the experience of hospitality at Disney world? DO you think they would return? We learned from the Institute that 75% of their business are repeat customers. Without outstanding hospitality, they would be out of business in a short time.

That idea of radical hospitality if you will - the way that family felt with their room decorated or the way there was always room for one more is the way of God I believe.

In getting to know you at Saint Mark, I have heard countless times that we value that kind of hospitality here. It may even be considered a core value here. No matter what your background, you will not be judged but welcomed. That the inclusive love of Jesus Christ will be evident inside our community of faith, no matter what age or economic ability.

Where does that core value come from? From our understanding of the inclusive ministry of Jesus himself. It is important to step back and take note of that. World Communion Sunday gives us an opportunity to re-commit and embrace that.

So how does Jesus' ministry reflect that?

One aspect was he came out of a culture in which only men were allowed access to seats of power. Granted, the

12 were also men, however, it is shown in the gospels that he took time to include women. Women were first at the tomb to see the resurrected Jesus and believed.

He also welcomed outcasts in society. Tax collectors, sinners, he even shocked authorities by touching lepers and speaking with them as if they were real people of value.

In his time, children were to keep quiet and in the background. He said, let the children come to me."

Outside groups were included - the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, and the Good Samaritan parable all include an outreach beyond the narrow cultural group.

Acts 2 sums it up, "All who believed were together"

No doubt we get our inspiration for inclusivity and diversity from Jesus himself, from the disciples accounts of what he values. I confess I wonder sometimes what Gospel those who reject inclusion and diversity are actually reading.

But we know history is full of those who reject this theology and wish to retain a kind of purity of culture. This was certainly articulated in Germany in the 1930s, but sadly many examples exist in almost any continent. Ethnic cleansing is the awful term we use and it has happened in China, on the African continent in Bosnia and we could go on.

So when we hear white supremacy we can be saddened but not surprised.

Not only Jesus is our model for this, but we go back to Paul's writing in Corinthians who says there is wisdom and strength in diversity.

He uses that wonderful image of the human body - we still talk about that when we think of the body of Christ here in the church.

In our physical bodies there are lots of moving parts, but they need to work in unison to allow us to function. The eye is not like the hand, but to hit a baseball you need them to work closely together.

But what if Paul meant this as more than just a clever literary image?

What if Paul meant that the body of Christ must have diversity if it is to thrive and be a force for good in the world?

Saint Mark Presbyterian Church is one of those places where Presbyterians long ago embraced diversity, and set out intentionally to be a church where doors were opened. That is something to celebrate about this church.

But our culture, our society our world seems to me to have uncertainty about this. It has been building for some time, but particularly in the past few years, people have been divided - divided by race, or by gender, or by economic class, or by political party, it is rich vs poor, men vs women, conservative vs liberal, and so on. Our leaders today seem to want to exacerbate this, divide us into our tribal groups, whether it is young vs old, conservative vs liberal, north vs south, educated vs not, old vs young, Christians vs Muslims, and so many other ways that we can be set against each other.

This is not the way of Jesus Christ.

Yet it is still hard for us to truly welcome people who are different, who are not like us. We agree in theory

with what Paul says, but how do we deal with those who are not like us?

It is simple, yet not easy - this World Communion Sunday is a symbol for us to extend radical hospitality and welcome to all people.

I have thought about this in many different church settings. It is not just a question of welcoming people from different cultural divides - it is also welcoming people who may have a difficult past. People who may have less than perfect lives, like the young woman named Barb in our story.

It is true - one reason that I love the PC(USA) is that I have had people in my ministry come up and ask me - "Pastor, I am divorced - am I welcome in the PC(USA) church?"

Or, some have asked, Pastor, my friend is handicapped, and is in a wheelchair - are they welcome in the PC(USAA) or will they just feel like they are in the way?

And I have heard, "My friend is thinking about coming to church, but her English is not so good, will she still be welcome in the PC(USA)?"

It makes all the difference to me in the world to be able to say without hesitation a resounding YES to each of those questions. Some churches put on their signboards, "This is God's house - all are welcome." What makes a difference is to say it and mean it.

In Acts, Paul writes about what just may be the first world communion Sunday. Languages were being understood by diverse groups. All who believed were together, regardless of race. Or ethnicity. They broke bread together, praising God. And every day, God added to their number.

Their lesson to us is that even though they were all in some ways different from each other, they were truly one in Christ Jesus.

This would also be my prayer for our congregation during this transitional time. That anything which may separate us be set aside, and put under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

That we would continue even in our virtual life to make people feel welcome here, that they would experience hospitality. That we would model that hospitality to a divided world.

Remember Barb from the Church of Joy - she experienced love and acceptance, and now she goes out with love for others - that is the gospel of Christ.

That is Growing in Community - is there room for one more?

The Good News is the reality that in the kingdom of God there is always room for one more.

Thanks be to God. Amen.