

September 4, 2011

“Marking Time, Making Community”

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Marking Time, Making Community

Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Pent 12A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett
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You've heard it said, and you may say it yourself.

"I don't need to go to church in order to have a relationship with God."

There is truth to that statement. It isn't false. Anyone of us can have a mystical experience of the Holy apart from being in church. That's why it is important to plan time for solitude and quiet.

The lectionary readings for the next few weeks help us to reflect on the nature of the gathered community, the church. Why do we need it if we can experience God anywhere?

Today I name two qualities of church:

The church marks time and makes community.

In the reading from Exodus the Lord is reported to say to Moses and Aaron: "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months...tell the whole congregation that they will mark this by..." and then proceeds to describe the Passover Meal.

Prior to this passage, the accounts of God are with one person, or just a few: such as Abraham and Sarai; Isaac and Rebekkah; and so on. There was no attempt to create a worshipping body as a result of God's relationship with them.

The passage from Exodus opens up a new dimension, which is relationship with God with a body of people. It is marked by carrying out particular rituals as a whole community. It marks the beginning of a new cultic, or worshipping, identity for the ancestors of Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob and their descendents.ⁱ

The end of the passage gives the reason why they should order their common life around this act of worship. It is not given for people to do alone, but to do as a body. In verse 14: "This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance."

The purpose given in Exodus is so that the whole body will remember together how they escaped slavery and death in Egypt and how God saved them. There was a sense of urgency in the instructions: dressed ready to leave; leave nothing behind. This is how you shall order your lives, says God.

The early Christians, who were actually Jews, continued the practice of Passover. Jesus then adapted it for the new fledgling movement. Today when an elder says the words of consecration over the bread and the cup, what is always said? "Do this in remembrance of me."

Part of our corporate marking of time is around the sacrament of Holy Communion where together we remember God's saving presence throughout time and eternity.

Worshipping together helps us remember who we are. Worshipping together helps us remember who God is.

Last week I mentioned John Wesley's General Rules for Christian living: Do no harm; Do good; stay in love with God. Wesley didn't exactly say the last one in those words. He said, "Attend upon all the ordinances of God." Wesley listed examples: The public worship of God; the ministry of the Word, either read or preached; Holy Communion; Family and private prayer; searching the scriptures; fasting or abstinence.ⁱⁱ These are ways we nurture our relationship with God.

More than half of them are for the whole body, gathered together.

In worship we do more than remember, however. We are also mutually formed and shaped by worship. We bring ourselves into a community of people and by our very presence we shape the community and have impact on God. Likewise, we are shaped by the community and God impacts us when we worship together.

We learn to worship only by actually worshipping with others. As children and youth participate in the worshipping community, they learn it, and they glean the work of the Spirit because we are together.

We mark time together. The lectionary, the liturgical calendar, the seasons of the year, all shape our patterns of worship.

That is an essential quality of being church.

The second one is making community.

Naturally community is experienced in worship, but nurturing community life is not the primary reason why we worship together. Our primary reason is to worship God and to be shaped and serve God's creation.

Coffee fellowship, classes, groups, task groups, committees all do much more to nurture our sense of community and friendship with one another.

Paul's letter to the Romans gives good guidance on how we live in community, that is with love. He says to love one another fulfills the commandments.

Matthew's Jesus gets very specific about how we make community. First, Jesus says, if someone offends you, sins against you, go to them and tell them. Talk it out. He also says; make this a private affair, just the two of you (no gossiping with others). It is clean and clear, not necessarily easy however.

Most of us do not like confrontations. I say most. There are usually some who thrive on them!! Confrontation takes a lot of energy, it takes focus, it takes intentionality, clarity, and it suggests a huge investment in the relationship to take the time to tell someone that they hurt you.

But most of the time, what do you do? Nothing. You take the offense with you, and you detach from the relationship. You see, you can't stay in relationship with someone if there has been offense and if nothing was done to address the offense. You invest less and less, leading to termination of the relationship.

This gets amplified in the church, because we mistake being nice with peace. We mistake overlooking someone's faults with reconciliation. They are not the same.

Jesus' outline for Christian behavior goes to the heart of the matter. Jesus' approach is pro-active. No passive-aggressive pouting allowed in this plan!

Go to the person, alone, and explain the offense. Why? Why should you bother talking with them if they have offended you?

For one: They may have no idea they offended you. They might feel badly if they knew they did, and they didn't realize the effect of what they did or said, or didn't do or say. Upon realizing the hurt, they have an opportunity to apologize. Then both of you have learned something significant about yourselves and each other, have cared for the relationship, and both of you have experienced God's grace and forgiveness.

Secondly: You could be wrong. You overheard part of a conversation and thought you knew the whole story. You made assumptions based on what you saw. You observed certain behavior and assigned your own meaning to the behavior.

We humans are very good at that, but we aren't usually right. In fact, we're pretty poor at mind reading! So you take your hurt directly to the person who hurt you and talk about it in private.

Early in my ministry I had such an experience. During a sermon a woman in church got up and walked out. I immediately thought “Oh, oh, I’ve just offended her!” I thought about it a lot during the next few days and created all kinds of scenarios about how upset she was with me. I knew I should talk to her, but I didn’t want to face it. Before I figured it out she approached me and said, “Oh I meant to tell you that I was sorry to leave in the middle of the sermon. I stayed as long as I could, but had to go to a baby shower.” What would have happened if I had acted on my assumptions based on her behavior. Inquiry is always better.

If we invest that much effort into a relationship we may feel like we’ve really cared for it, or if it didn’t work - we may feel that at least we did all we could.

But, of course, Jesus has more for us to do. If reconciliation isn’t achieved, then he says to bring in some trusted members of the community so there can be more ears, eyes, wisdom in the room. Open it up so that the insight of others can help bring understanding.

This requires vulnerability on the part of the offended one, and the one accused of offending. It takes community to a much deeper level, where there is trust in the wisdom in the counsel of others. It deeply values the relationships to seek such understanding and reconciliation.

Jesus then said, if that doesn’t work, the third try is that you bring the whole mess before the whole church. Oh, wouldn’t you just die?

It conjures up images of witch hunts and trials and stonings. “No,” we cry, “we would never do that. We are a tolerant community and we could never do that.”

Well, I’m not sure I could either, but I must say that at times when one or two persons have disrupted church community with their own agenda and everyone just looks the other way and is nicey-nice about it, avoid the conflict, and let that person disrupt community, I know Jesus has it right.

Do we value our community? Our world? Will we invest what is needed to *make* community? Do we trust the faith we have been given?

Oh, but Jesus goes on, he says, if that person refuses to listen, then let them be to you as tax collectors and Gentiles. “OK,” we say, that sounds like ex-communication. Three strikes and you’re out, Jesus-style, and say, “Good riddance.”

Oh, but there’s one little catch. (You knew there was, didn’t you?)

The context for this passage is found in the first half of this chapter...the verses talk about receiving the children, and leaving the ninety nine sheep to find the one lost one.

And how did Jesus treat Gentiles and Tax Collectors? He called them to be his disciples, he told one tax collector to come down from a tree because Jesus was going to his house for dinner. He welcomed them.

He told one Gentile to go and preach the Gospel. Jesus was always being criticized for hanging out with Gentiles and tax collectors, the offensive ones.

Uh Oh! We don’t get to say good bye to the one who offends us.

So just when we think we have permission to throw the scumbag out, Jesus reminds us who we are. We are daughters and sons of God who love and who forgive over and over again. (keep in mind, this is describing offenses, not abuse). Jesus calls us to a ministry and lifestyle of peace and reconciliation.

Jesus encourages us to “trust the community, to value the wisdom of the gathered, to confront what is offensive so that it doesn’t turn to violence and abuse, intolerance and injury.

And this is what Jesus means when he says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Working to deepen and strengthen the community so that we can be in ministry in the world truly sustained by our love for one another.

We make community with authentic relationships that become stronger when honesty and love are combined. We are shaped and transformed by such love.

Henri Nouwen wrote:

"No one person
can fulfill all your needs.
But the community can truly hold you.
The community
can let you experience the fact
that beyond your anguish,
there are human hands
that hold you
and show you
God's faithful love." ⁱⁱⁱ

We need each other to remember who we are and who God is.

We need each other to become more of who we are becoming and to trust where God is leading us.

We need each other as we share such amazing love in our communities and world.

ⁱ as suggested in www.processandfaith.org

ⁱⁱ The Book of Discipline of the UMC, The United Methodist Publishing House, 2008, ¶103. pp 73-74

ⁱⁱⁱ Henri J.M. Nouwen in *Embraced by God's Love* (Garborg's Heart n' Home / Bloomington MN)