On Community

September 17, 2023
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Texts:
 1 Peter 4: 8-11
 Hebrews 10: 24-25

First Peter is a letter written by the Apostle Peter between 62 to 63 AD and it was addressed to a group of small Christian communities scattered throughout an area now belonging to modern-day Turkey. Once an excitable fisherman whose passion and love for Jesus caused him to dare to walk on water, only to lose his nerve halfway to Jesus’ outstretched arms, Peter is now a seasoned leader, standing firm in his faith and giving encouragement to his Christian brothers and sisters who are suffering persecution at the hands of the Roman empire. Peter is writing from Rome, the belly of the beast, where the power of the empire is on full display. Only a fool would have thought that there was any way to challenge that power, any hope that things could be different. But Peter has witnessed the death and resurrection of Jesus and he knows that not only is there a power greater than the Roman empire, but there is a power greater than death itself.

And that is the power of God’s love. A love so strong that it raised Jesus from the dead and gave lie once and for all to the notion that might makes right and that hate and fear are a winning combination.

“Above all… Above all” Peter counsels his scattered flock, do not give into fear or anxiety, but rather love each other deeply. It’s not enough just to love each other, you must love each other “deeply” Why, I wonder did he add the qualifier “deeply”? There are a number of different words in Greek for love, depending on what type of love you mean, the three I was familiar with are the “eros” sexual love, “filial” brother/sisterly love and agape, self-sacrificing love. But Peter, in is letter, which was written in Greek, employes yet a fourth word for love, Philadelphia which translates as “genuine mutual love”. Perhaps Peter adds the qualify “deeply” because he knew just how hard it can be to practice this kind of love.

Someone wiser than I once observed that it’s easy to love people in general; it’s loving them in their particularly where things can get difficult. The type of love that Peter is talking about is not based on a feeling; it’s rooted in action, the action of showing care and concern for another, regardless of how you might personally feel about them. It’s the kind of love that wishes only the best for another person, that wants what God wants for that person, for them to be happy and whole and free to offer the gifts that God has given them to the benefit of the wider community.

Peter goes on to counsel his readers to offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Therefore, it’s not enough to merely offer a meal or a bed for the night; it must be offered with kindness and not complaint. Finally, Peter goes on to say that any gifts we have are to be used in service to others. Arguably, this all sounds like a pretty tall order, but the Good News is that we don’t have to do it alone: we have God’s strength to rely on, and to be in right relationship with God helps us be in right relationship with our siblings.

Similar themes of mutual love and service among the earliest Christian communities are echoed in the passage from Hebrews, written around the same time, although its exact authorship has been lost to history.

And while this week’s scripture passages focus on how members of the earliest Christina communities were to treat one another, Jesus made clear in his story of the good Samaritan and his sermon on the mount that kindness and hospitality are not just reserved for the in-group … but that is a sermon for another day.

Rather this morning, as we celebrate and remember our specific heritage as a legacy community of Church of the Saviour, the focus of my teaching is on the importance of Christian community in the life of believers.

Certainly, there are Christians throughout history who have chosen a solitary, rather than a communal life. But such a life is only for the most spiritually mature. The rest of us need community to help us grow in faith and to keep us honest about the ways in which we fall short of what God created us to be. We need our Christian siblings to hold out their arms and catch us when we stumble; we need them to hold us up in prayer when our own wells have run dry and to challenge us to see ancient scriptures with new eyes. But perhaps most of all, we need our fellow pilgrims along the way to remind us who and whose we are when we forget and start to succumb to the *lie* that fear and hate are more powerful than love.

When I moved to Washington in 1984 after graduating from college, I was only planning on staying for a year until I figured out what to do with my life. I had never heard of Church of the Saviour or any of the sister communities that it had birthed. I had no job and only a temporary house-sitting gig. If my parents had any doubts about my plans, or lack thereof, they mercifully kept them to themselves.

While I had not read any of Elizabeth O’Conner’s books chronicling the life of the Church of the Saviour, a friend from college had, and in addition to securing the house-sitting opportunity, she also suggested I check out one of the sister communities, the Potter’s House Church, then meeting on Wednesday evenings at, unsurprisingly, the Potter’s House. As I recall, I went once, perhaps twice, and wasn’t particularly drawn to the community.

At some point, someone suggested I check out Eighth Day which met on Sunday, also at the Potter’s House. The Sunday I walked into worship at the Eighth Day Faith Community was the day the community was declaring Sanctuary, committing themselves, along with dozens of other churches across the country, to protect asylum seekers from Central America in defiance of the US governments efforts to deport them.

I thought: I’ve found my people! Here were people whose practice of Christianity was not limited to sixty minutes on a Sunday. Here were people who were living their faith on a daily basis, taking risks for it, even.

It was an exciting, heady time to finally, after many years of dutiful church-going, find a Christian community that was truly alive in a way I had never experienced before.

This aliveness, I would come to find out, was rooted in a level of commitment that demanded putting one’s faith journey in the center of one’s life, not relegating it to the periphery.

As we read in this week’s chapter from *Call to Commitment*, to become a member of Church of the Saviour required, among other things five classes in the School of Christian Living, a lengthy period of sponsorship and a tithe of one’s income. Over the years, a number of the original requirements for membership would be modified in response to the changing needs of the community, but the idea that that membership should be a thoughtful, intentional process has remained a bedrock of the legacy Church of the Saviour communities, including the Eighth Day Faith Community.

Eighth Day’s current iteration of the membership commitment reads as follows:

I come today to join the Eighth Day Faith Community. I commit myself to following Jesus, whose life was fully centered in the grace and truth of God. I believe that God’s transcendent love is revealed in Jesus. I will endeavor to follow Jesus in paths of peace, forgiveness, healing, justice, and mercy.

I accept God’s call on my life as my highest priority. I will seek to be open to God’s transforming power and love. I acknowledge that God’s truth is revealed in many ways, and through other people and other faiths.

I commit as a Member\* to engage in the spiritual disciplines and practices that are expected of my membership. In making this commitment, I affirm that the practice of spiritual discipline is necessary to deepen both my spiritual growth and my engagement with the world. I recognize that I need the support, challenge, and discernment of my Christian community in order to grow spiritually, walk humbly, and act in faithfulness.

I acknowledge that we are united in God’s love and grace. I offer my gifts, my strengths, and my weaknesses to this community and pledge to open my heart to what others bring. I accept the responsibility to build, sustain, celebrate, and challenge our community to do God’s will in the world.

I will respond to Christ’s call to stand with “the least of these” by committing my resources of time, money, and energy to help build a world of inclusiveness, love, and equity. I joyfully affirm that I am called to a life of love that includes all God’s creation.

Nearly 2000 years after the Apostle Peter wrote to those under his care, we hear his words echoing across the centuries in our own membership commitment which stands as a reminder that the fundamentals of what it means to be a Chrisitan haven’t changed. To be a Christian is to seek to follow Jesus as best we can, to love one another, to offer radical, inclusive hospitality and to engage in acts of services.

Unchanged as well are all of the obstacles that undermine our ability to remain open to God’s transforming power. For while empires switch out over time, their fundamental construct remains the same, prioritizing the accumulation of wealth and human power in the hands of a few, to the determinant of the many. Perhaps most damaging of all is the way empire gets inside our heads, telling us that there is no point in resisting because nothing will ever change.

But things can and do change. But change isn’t easy, on either a personal or a communal level. And part of the integrity of membership that stand at the heart of Eighth Day is a willingness to be open to be challenged by our fellow pilgrims on the Way to re-think our positions, to concede that we might be wrong about something, to be open to the movement of the Spirit in new and surprising ways.

Over the years there are people who have come to Eighth Day after having read Elizabeth O’Conner’s books, with a rather idealized view of things. However, community can get pretty messy at times. It’s not always easy being with folks that God, not you, has called together. Tempers have flared, feelings have gotten hurt, people have gone off of in anger and not returned. Like any worthwhile endeavor, building a strong, vibrant, life-giving community needs lots of time, care and attention. It also involved creating space for everyone to be able to offer their unique gifts and talents.

Next week, Marcia will be sharing more about the importance of invoking and nurturing one another’s gifts, but in concluding today’s teaching, I want to touch upon another important facet of Eighth Day’s particular expression of Christian community, and that’s our reliance on lay leadership. Eighth Day does not have paid clergy or administrative support staff. That means that in addition to nurturing one’s own spiritual journey, either through a mission group or other accountability group, all of us have a role to play in sustaining the community as a whole. For some that is serving on the Leadership Council, for others, that’s means showing up early on Sunday to help set up or serving on the budget committee or giving a children’s teaching. These are but a few examples of the ways you can contribute to the wider community. Here at Eighth Day, as I’m fond of saying, we are all crew, working together to make sure not only that the ship merely stays afloat, but that it keeps sailing onward.

So, there is room aboard for everyone, and if you haven’t quite found your niche on the crew yet, consider this your invitation to reflect on how you might help keep support our communal life.

As I was preparing my teaching for today, I felt it was important not only to refer to the membership commitment but to read it out loud as well. I don’t know about you all, but the only time I take the commitment out and read it is in the period leading up to Recommitment Sunday. But I think I should keep it at hand and refer to it more often. To remind myself of what I, of what we, have committed ourselves to. To have the words seep into our heads and hearts. To help keep us on the right path when the cacophony of empire threatens to drown out the gentle whisperings of the Spirit. And most importantly, to keep us on the Way that leads to life.

Amen and Alleluia.