

“The First Three ‘R’s”

Text: Exodus 12: 1 -14; Matthew 18: 15 - 20

Used: Cong. Church of Naugatuck – 9/7/08

Let me again say a word of welcome to any who are visiting with us as a part of our New Beginning’s Open House. And I thought that as I start my sermon it might be helpful for me to tell you a little about our church.

First, this church is a conglomeration of some amazingly gifted people. There are a great many people here who are only scratching the surface of their potential for ministry. I honestly believe we can accomplish anything we put our minds to. However, we just don’t put our minds to certain things. Some things get our attention and some things don’t.

Further, this church is filled with very loving people who have proved over and over again that they will “lay aside their life” to help a friend in need. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen this. If you let the church know you are facing a difficult time, you are likely to feel just shy of smothered by the loving embrace that comes your way. However, there are times when we don’t always lead with love. There are times when we get grumpy with one another, when we become frustrated that others are not putting as much into the church as we are, and when we place our own individual needs ahead of building community.

Finally, we are a church that does many amazing things to give God’s word of hope feet in our world. We sponsor mission trip to the Dominican Republic and Mexico. We bring prayer shawls to those who need to be enwrapped by God’s love. We worship in traditional ways while being creative enough to see how a new drumbeat may help our scriptures come alive. We have not one but three exuberant youth groups ... which in this day and age is nothing short of a miracle. We have a clothier that allows those of limited means to have dignity of selecting some clothes that they can purchase inexpensively. I could go on, but I should save some for later in the day. Yes, we do some amazing things; however, we can also get very down on ourselves. We can get stuck looking at ourselves through the lenses of inferiority, seeing only our deficits and being blinded to the blessings of who we are.

Now I know that my words may not be exactly the words you might expect to hear when trying to win visitors over. After having watched two back to back political party campaigns, we are quite used to hearing an assembly extol its own virtues while critiquing the delinquencies of the other. What I suspect we are not used to hearing is an honest assessment of strengths and weaknesses. But if we are truly to open our house to you this day, well then I suppose that means letting you look under the beds and peek in the closets as well.

You see, we are not a perfect church. Never have been. Never will be. If you want perfection, this is not the place for you.

However, if you want a community of people who will walk the journey of faithfulness with you no matter how steep the road gets, then our open house may become a home for you.

And it is not just us. The church as a whole and every setting of it is imperfect. I've heard it said before that the church is a lot like Noah's ark. If it weren't for the storm outside, you couldn't stand the smell inside.

Jesus suffered no delusion of perfection within the church. Perhaps our gospel might well have ended, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there is bound to be disagreements and hurt feelings." Jesus understood that any community that came together – whether it be for the purpose of faith or not – would be imperfect. People would be cranky...people would disagree...people would get mad at each other. That is merely an inevitability of living in community.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that one of the very few times Jesus ever mentioned faith communities or the church, it has to do with handling conflict. And as much as Jesus loves to speak in parable and story, he outlines a very specific process for handling disagreements in church.

Now, we who are experienced in the church know what Jesus is going to say, don't we? You find someone to take an anonymous message to a committee meeting to have it discussed. That's how things should be handled, right? Well not so much.

Step one is you take your concern to the person face to face. You might not be able to talk to the person and still get your own way, but there will always exist some interpersonal wall between you. Resolving disagreements and conflicts requires the courage to deal with the person directly. If the two of you still can't hear each other, then bring someone else in...someone who can help clarify where you both stand. If such a mediating presence doesn't work, then it is the appropriate time for the two of you to discuss your situation in front of the gathered community. But seeking to resolve conflict in a meeting setting is only to be done after everything else has been tried.

In many ways, for a teaching of Jesus this is very straight forward. You can't misunderstand it...only follow it or not follow it. But then Jesus throws in that last statement..."Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am." And I'm left feeling like all this talk of conflict resolution in the church and this last sentence about Jesus presence in community really don't go well together.

It may actually be our Old Testament lesson which gives us a clue as to how the two fit. Our Old Testament lesson continues the story of the exodus which we have been reading for a few weeks. Now we are to the story of Passover. And if I may say so, it is a rather gruesome and gory story: a story of how to slaughter and prepare a lamb for dinner and how to mark one house to avoid infanticide. Yet it is one of the most remembered and celebrated stories in Jewish tradition. A story which provides the roots for our own communion celebration. You see, to Jewish ears this story is a reminder of God's promises of liberation – and the fulfillment of those promises which restores and renews the community. The Jewish community would certainly follow this story with a lot of imperfect moments...infighting...disagreeing...becoming more concerned with their own need than with God's vision. But they would always return to remembering. Remembering what God promised and how God delivered.

This is why we do the church thing despite its imperfections...because together we remember. Together we remember what God has promised. And in that act of remembering we find that God restores and renews us as a community and as individuals.

“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I”. Jesus ends this teaching on problems in the church, but reminding us why we are the church. Because together we remember better...and because together we are better able to lead each other to the living presence of God. Jesus is clear that this is something that happens as community that really doesn’t happen the same way individually. Sure, we may be able to be faithful for a while without the challenges that being in community creates, but there will come a time when our souls are in true need of restoration and renewal and at those times community will be essential.

I remember growing up speaking of three “R”s, particular as the new school year would begin – reading, writing and arithmetic. Today, there is a new set of three “R”s that have to do with “green” living...reduce, reuse, recycle. What I offer you this morning on our day of new beginnings, is what were the first three “R”s. The three “R”s that come from Passover story. The three “R”s that are the core of being a faith community. Together we remember so that we may be restored and renewed. Together we remember so that we may be restored and renewed.

And so, for those of you visiting with us today, if you came looking for perfection in a church, you won’t find it here. Good luck finding it anywhere else either. But if you came looking for a place where we remember together what God is doing in our world, then our doors are always open to you. Welcome. Welcome. Amen.