

“The Pure Intention of Blessing”

At first glance our text today seems like an odd choice for a church anniversary. Menus? Idols? What’s that got to do with celebrating two hundred and twenty-five years of ministry in the Naugatuck Valley? Well, maybe you’ve had a fight or two over what to serve at the church dinner, or whose turn it is to be gracious and take a large serving of Mabel’s infamous casserole. (Mabel, by the way, is a name I picked out of thin air. If there’s a Mabel here today, I’m sure your casserole is delicious!) No, not much fighting over food. And I’ll bet you could read through all the Prudential Council minutes and never find a reference to idols. What does the Corinthians issue of food and idols have to do with us?

But look again, and we’ll discover a theme as ancient as Corinth and as contemporary as 21st century Naugatuck. It’s about any church in any age where Christians have been so preoccupied with being right that they have lost sight of love. It’s about any church in any age where Christians have been so preoccupied with being best, that they have lost sight of their call to be a blessing. It’s about any church in any age where Christians have been so puffed up with their sure knowledge of what is right or wrong that they have let all the air - or the Spirit - out of their lives. Paul knew that idols were inanimate objects erected to honor non-existent gods, that food offered to inanimate objects honoring non-existent gods was not harmful to your health, spiritual or otherwise. But he also knows that there are some Christians in this new community in Corinth, easily troubled and confused, who still believe that by eating food offered to idols they will somehow be dishonoring the God they know in Jesus Christ. So for their sake, Paul says, don’t eat the food. Don’t make knowledge more important than love. Put the community first, even before your own theological truth. Paul tells us here that it’s about getting our life together right, more than simply getting it right.

One of the classic books about how Christians are to behave in the church was written by the famous German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, born 100 years ago next week. *Life Together* was written at a time of crisis in Germany as Christians struggled to remain faithful in the face of the Nazi distortions and idolatries. There’s nothing romantic about church life for Bonhoeffer. The central chapter begins with an acknowledgment of how the seeds of dissension and discord inevitably are sown in the church. It starts with a familiar story from Luke about the disciples: “An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.” He goes on:

No Christian community ever comes together without this argument appearing as a seed of discord. No sooner are people together than they begin to observe, judge, and classify each other. Thus, even as Christian community is in the process of being formed, an invisible, often unknown, yet terrible life and death struggle commences.

Paul’s community was not immune. Paul’s church in Corinth was not immune. You know the

United Church of Christ is not immune to the life and death struggle. I suspect First Church in Naugatuck has not been, either. “An argument started as to which of them would be the greatest.”

Marilyn Robinson, member of the United Church of Christ, talks about blessing in her recent novel, *Gilead*, in which she has her old preacher narrator recall an experience from his childhood when he and his little friends spent a summer afternoon baptizing a litter of cats.

Their grim old crooked tailed mother found us baptizing away by the creek and began carrying her babies off by the napes of their necks, one and then another. We lost track of which was which, but we were fairly sure that some of the creatures had been borne away still in the darkness of paganism, and that worried us a good deal. So finally I asked my father in the most offhand way imaginable what exactly would happen to a cat if one were to, say, baptize it. He replied that the Sacraments must always be treated with the greatest respect. That wasn't really an answer to my question. We did respect the Sacraments, but we thought the whole world of those cats. . . . I still remember how those warm little brows felt under the palm of my hand. Everyone has petted a cat, but to touch one like that, with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mid. For years we would wonder what, from a cosmic viewpoint, we had done to them. It still seems to me to be a real question. There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn't enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power in that.

The pure intention of blessing.

On this anniversary Sunday thoughts turn to the nature, the meaning of your ministry here in the Naugatuck Valley, and of your ministry as part of the larger family of the United Church of Christ. It's been, of course, a myriad array of words and deeds, of sacraments and sermons, of prayers and visits, of prophetic witness for justice and peace, of teaching and nurturing, of pastoral care and embrace, of compassionate service, extravagant welcome, and evangelical courage. It is all of these things, and more. But in the end, our ministry is no more, and no less, than being a church building up the community in love, rather than being puffed up in knowledge. Our ministry, your ministry, is to touch each other and the world with the pure intention of blessing, acknowledging sacredness.

Not quite a year ago I spent a day in a town at the very southern tip of India visiting people who had survived the tsunami and who were now being sheltered and cared for by a hospital supported in part by gifts from the United Church of Christ. For hours I moved through the wards literally besieged by victims wanting to tell me their story, sharing in a language I could not understand stories of a horror I could scarcely comprehend. But what they really seemed to want from this religious leader was to be touched - a sign of the cross traced on a forehead, a gentle caress, an embrace. To be blessed in the midst of the sorrow and the slaughter. Having lost everything, including family members, they needed to know that sacredness had not been taken away.

In early December I spent three days with pastors from the Gulf Coast reflecting on

ministry in the wake of Katrina and Rita. One evening we were joined by a group of evacuees, former residents of the 9th ward of New Orleans who had fled to the Astrodome in Houston where they were met by members of one of our churches. Out of that encounter was born the Amistad Resettlement Project, recalling the Amistad event of our New England forebears, a project that has now helped over one hundred families resettle in the Houston area. It was a night of surprising testimony. To be sure, there are natives of New Orleans scattered in the diaspora across the south yearning desperately to go home. But for the neighbors we met, home has been found in a new community of beauty, of hope, and of peace. One young man told us that his life in New Orleans had been a steady course toward destruction. "Of the ten commandments, I regularly violated about eleven!" A young woman told us that she used to fear the streets outside her house day and night. "My best friend was shot a week before the storm." Now she has discovered a place of safety for herself and her babies. Your gifts to our national disaster appeal has made this possible.

To touch, with the pure intention of blessing. This fall our 23 year old son, David, surprised us by announcing he was joining the National Guard. David is excited, and we want to be excited about this challenge he's taken on, too. But it's not been easy. There is, of course, the anxiety any parent would have at a time when National Guard troops are regularly in harms way in Iraq. On top of that, I am a child of the sixties, and carry from those difficult days in the Vietnam era some baggage about things military. In my ministry I've always tried to be supportive of soldiers in our church and their families, always tried to honor their service, always tried to acknowledge sacredness beneath military camouflage. But David's announcement pushed some buttons, started some old tapes, and confronted me with caricatures and stereotypes I'm not proud of. I shared all of this in a long letter to a colleague who serves as our military chaplain endorser and liaison. He wrote back a beautiful pastoral letter, including the news that the senior chaplain where David would be doing his basic training is UCC. Before I knew it, that chaplain had contacted me and offered his support. A week after David left for Missouri we'd only had one brief call telling us he'd arrived. I still don't have much news. But last week I got an email from the chaplain. The subject line simply said, "I met David." He'd welcomed him, had a prayer with him, promised to be available if David needed anything in this strange new world. I'm sure David appreciated it. For me it was nothing short of blessing.

To touch with the pure intention of blessing. It's what we do, and there is power in that. Yet there is often enormous challenge because we do it in a world that, as Bonhoeffer puts it, wants to observe, judge, and classify, to know the right from the wrong, the true from the false, a world often nervous about being promiscuous with our blessing. At a service of remembrance for those who died in the terrorist attacks on 9/11, held a year after the tragedy, I listened to a United Church of Christ navy chaplain describe her ministry in those awful and awesome days. She was stationed at the Pentagon, and she was assigned in the week after the attacks to a team at the morgue where the remains were brought. As the mangled bodies arrived a doctor would make the formal pronouncement of death, a clerk would assign a number to help in the identification, and then she would offer a blessing. Most of the remains were unrecognizable. "As I blessed, over and over again," she said, "it suddenly occurred to me that since I couldn't know who I was blessing, it might well be that the remains in front of me were not comrades from the Pentagon, but terrorists from the sky. Never before in my ministry have I had to struggle with the troubling extravagance

of God's grace." Could ministry, blessing, ever be more unsettling, or more extravagant?

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols. Translate that into any divisive theological and moral issue of our time, or of any generation that has worshiped here. What has kept you faithful, and what has kept you together, is not knowledge, but love. For two hundred and twenty-five years First Church has reached out to touch with the extravagance of God's grace. Reaching not to control, to manipulate, to harm, but with the pure intention of blessing. Acknowledging sacredness for all to see. To be a blessing. And there's power in that. Amen.