

OF ONE HEART AND SOUL

Acts 2: 42 -17

April 17, 2005 SBCC

In the summer of 1985, (I can't believe it's twenty years ago now), a profound change occurred in the way I understood God, especially in the way I understood how God comes to us. While my faith has changed here and there since then, that particular understanding has not changed, and it is to that understanding that I would like to speak.

As a child and a young person, God seemed to exist outside myself – “up there” or “out there.” I knew the presence of God but that presence seemed very “other”, very “different.” Somewhere in my adult years came a gradual learning that Christ, the incarnate God, dwelt within me and within all of humanity. The Matthew 25 understanding of Christ, the one that goes “...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me drink...”, became my touchstone, the core of my faith. But faith is never static, it's always growing and changing, and in that summer of 1985, I learned that Christ not only lives in us as individual beings but also in the spaces between us, in our relationships among each other. Christ comes to us in community and gives us “one heart and soul,” as it says later in Acts, just as he came to the apostles on that first Easter Sunday and then again in the following days.

As part of my training to become a minister, I spent ten weeks in chaplaincy training, known to insiders as CPE, or Clinical Pastoral Education. That experience was pivotal for me - life changing, in fact. I spent those ten weeks at the University of North Carolina Memorial Hospital learning to be a chaplain. Only part of our training was the experience of working with patients. The other significant piece of training was the experience of being in community with each other, the eight of us in training and our two supervisors, the experience of learning to trust each other enough to expose our dark sides and our fears and our deepest longings to each other. We did this in the hour and a half we met with each other formally, and also in shared meals and coffee breaks and social get – togethers.

On the first day of our summer experience, before we really had any understanding of what was to come, John David, a stuffy and rather arrogant, young, rich and handsome, high church Anglo Catholic asked if we ever did anything “religious” during the summer. One of our supervisors replied, “Oh, once or twice.” John David was obviously displeased with the reply.

About a week or two into the program, Rudy, a 35 year old Roman Catholic seminarian had an experience which left him puzzled. He'd had an encounter with an older man whose wife was dying, which left both him and the man in tears, much to the man's obvious embarrassment. Rudy didn't understand what prompted his own tears, nor was he sure if his behavior had been appropriate. He wasn't sure if the other man's tears were a good thing since he'd been trying so hard to hold them back.

As we, as a group, listened and offered support, and as Rudy processed his experience, he came to understand that he'd done a good bit of ministry in helping the man to cry, since it's virtually

impossible to move through grief without tears. He came to understand that his own tears were indeed appropriate. It's always appropriate to show compassion for another – to cry with another. The most startling part of the process came, when under the persistent questioning of our supervisors, Rudy realized that his tears were for his own grandmother who had died when he was a teenager and for whom he'd never been able to grieve. As that understanding dawned, Rudy let go of years of grief and guilt and sobbed for quite some time in the presence of the rest of us, who knew we'd witnessed a healing as much as if Jesus had been standing in the room with us. It wasn't just that Christ dwelt in Rudy and in the other man and in us as we offered support, but Christ was in the interactions among us all. Healing wouldn't have occurred without the interactions, without the relationships. We learned, that day, that when we minister, we are the ones who get ministered to. We learned that power, the power of Christ, exists when people come together in intentional community. When Rudy had quieted and the room was silent, one of our supervisors said, "Who says we never do anything religious around here?" Christ had come to us in that small hospital room and we all knew it, and for me that was the beginning of my understanding of the role of community in seeking Christ.

God may be transcendent and other, but God is mediated to us through community. Even Jesus needed community. At the end of his life, Jesus gathered his friends in that Upper Room and asked to be remembered. He broke bread with them, called for companionship in the garden and cried on the cross not to be left alone.

It's as though God were not enough for him. I do not mean, of course, that God in some absolute sense, was not sufficient, but that Jesus was profoundly committed to his friends even when the intent was not a religious one. The longing Jesus spoke of to share a final meal with his disciples was personal and thoroughly human. As the inevitability of a tragic end to his life overwhelmed him, he veered between ardent prayers to God and heartfelt petitions to his sleeping disciples.

Jesus came to his disciples on Easter night and he gave them the Holy Spirit. He came into their community and they knew him and rejoiced in his presence. He didn't come to them one by one. Thomas was absent from the community that night and so he was left out of that common experience and he couldn't understand and he couldn't believe.

A week later, Jesus came again to the gathered community and this time Thomas was there. This time he shared the experience of Christ in community. This time he could believe and proclaim "My Lord and my God."

Our text from Acts says, "They devoted themselves ...to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need..... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

The community we have here in this church may not be willing to go quite as far as the community of the early church. I doubt we'll sell all our goods and possessions. Nevertheless, the community in this church is good community. There is true caring and love for each other in this community that is called Suttons Bay Congregational Church. It's not always perfect. Sometimes we get angry with each other and sometimes feelings get hurt, but I have seen, in my

six months here, a lot of forgiveness happen and a lot of remorse and concern for those whose feelings do get hurt.

I have heard some people call this church a social club or country club church. Perhaps you have heard that too – and it stings. And it makes some of us feel guilty for having a good time at church. So let me say this loud and clear. There is nothing wrong with having a good time together. There is nothing wrong with having your social life centered around the church. It is good that you like each other so much. Peter Steinke, the developer of the Healthy Congregations workshops says the congregation that plays together stays together. I have found you to be as warm, welcoming and friendly a congregation as I have ever encountered. You have a gift. You are blessed. Let's celebrate it and thank God for it.

But – and there's always a "but" isn't there? Good things can't be hoarded and kept to ourselves. Good things go sour if they're not shared. There's a next step for this church and that's to reach out to share the community that is here with the larger community that is out there.

What am I talking about? Well, here are some for instances. Right now, there are five of us, including myself, working in the Youth Friends program over at the elementary school, meeting weekly with a little child who needs some special love and attention. My little first grader's mother was in jail when I started seeing her about a year ago. And after several months out, she's back in jail. That's kind of hard for a little one to deal with. What if there were fifteen or twenty of us visiting these kids? What if some of those fifteen or twenty were men working with some of the little boys who don't have an adequate father figure in their lives? Don't you think school personnel would sit up and take notice that all these Congregational church members were doing something of significance? "My goodness, that's a church that practices what it preaches" they might say.

The Mission Committee is investigating the possibility of offering minor repairs to those in our church or in the community who have no other way of getting these things done. What if we had crews out in the community doing little things like fixing broken doorbells or shaky steps – or even building ramps for people with disabilities? The social club kind of remarks would stop in a big hurry. We'd be known as "a church that does a lot."

Two caveats here: first, we don't do these things to spruce up our image. We do them because God calls us to do them. On the other hand, maybe we do do them to spruce up our image – but if that's the case I'd bet a good many of you will get hooked on whatever it is you're doing. God has a funny way of making that happen.

The other thing I wanted to say is that I know many, many of you are up to your eyeballs doing good works in the community already. And I know God has called you to those good works. Problem is that others in the community don't know that you're from this church or why you do it. There's some definite merit to doing things in the name of the church. That's the main way folks like us do evangelism. We let people judge our faith and our church by our deeds, our actions. Love is not a scarce commodity. The more we love the more we are able to love and the more love comes back to us.

Just a word here about money. When I was the director of Advent House Ministries, our budget grew over the course of eight years from about \$30,000 to \$440,000. We never knew where the money was going to come from. Our newsletter was called “Leap of Faith”. We were forever starting new programs without a clue as to where the money was coming from – but it always came. This past week I talked to my successor, who is still there after eleven years, bless her heart. I asked her how things were going and she said they were going fine although there was always the stress of not knowing where the money was going to come from. The day I talked to her she said she had been stressed for several days over having to pay a liability insurance bill of \$1723.00. That day a check for \$1700 had shown up in the mail. I do believe, and it has certainly been my experience, that when we are doing God’s work, the money comes. As the saying goes “What goes around, comes around.”

Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen says *Community is the place where God completes our lives with joy. This complete joy is always ours, that is, it belongs to a life together.* This joyful living in the presence of Christ which Nouwen calls “Ecstatic living” is always a movement toward an increasingly shared life. *Static living separates us and turns us into isolated individuals fighting for our own survival. But ecstatic living leads us to the place where new life is discovered ‘among us’. It makes us break through our walls of isolation and become a people of God, people who proclaim the joy of eternal life that has already begun. It is the first sign of the kingdom that Jesus came to proclaim.*

Those first Christians found “ecstatic living.” They devoted themselves to teaching and fellowship. They gave to anyone who had need. They ate together and prayed together. They were of one heart and soul. *And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.* God grant that it may be so with us.