

“The Community of Jesus:”

Sermon for January 31st, 2010 by The Rev. Joe Summers

Not many preachers can say that the first time they preached in their home community, it led the congregation to try to kill them, which is what our Gospel today says happened to Jesus, when Jesus first preached in his home town. But Jesus always seems to have been a hit, always seemed to stir people to the core of their being. His experience might lead us to reflect more on what a good sermon is really about. Today, I want to talk about the community of Jesus then - across the ages, and today - here in this place.

The community of Jesus has looked radically different in different times and places. Always, it has been about the Feast of Love prophesied by Isaiah, the feast through which the dominion of death and shame are brought to an end, and God creates a feast of good things and wipes the tears from every eye. But when that Feast has been a true feast, it's been because it was rooted in the needs of a particular time and place.

In his own time, the community of Jesus seemed to be about two main things. The first was creating these large community gatherings in which people shared what they had, and everyone was fed. It addressed the immediate needs many had for food, at a time when a large percentage of the population had lost their lands and livelihood and were therefore living lives dominated by scarcity. These feasts not only concretely fed people, but they also removed the mantle of shame that came with scarcity - the feeling that they were a burden not a gift, and the isolation that people were suffering from, as they fell into the “everybody is on their own” mentality. The other main thing Jesus seemed to be about was destroying the illusions and ideologies that upheld the reign of social death in his society. In his first sermon we see him strike at the heart of how his faith community saw itself and justified its treatment of gentiles and the gentile world by considering them as unclean and everything to do with the gentiles to be unclean. In contrast, Jesus points out that, again and again, it is outsiders who proved to be more faithful than those within the community. His story of the Good Samaritan was like telling a story to a gathering of the Christian right about a Muslim or gay man who was more faithful than Christians. It infuriates them. While today he manages to evade their wrath, ultimately he will decide to tear down the gates of hell in his society by exposing the wrath that lay, not only behind Roman domination and also a faith community more concerned about maintaining the social order, than it is about helping the poor and suffering.

Not long after Jesus, the message of Jesus spread quickly through the ancient world. It's code words were “Jesus is Lord”, which signified a world that was the very opposite of the world in which “Caesar is Lord.” From the letters of Paul we can see that the community of Jesus, as found in the urban areas around the Roman empire, was similar in some ways to Jesus' community in Galilee, but very different in others. They too gathered around the Feast of love. Their Eucharists took place in the context of a full meal. Here too we find the emphasis on overcoming oppression and domination, though we see from Paul's letters that this looks very different in different communities. Among the Celtic population in Galatia it will look like challenging

religious superstition. Among the Corinthians it will be about challenging the whole Patronage system that led the wealthy to spiritual arrogance and crushed the hopes of the poor. In all of them Paul proclaimed that being baptized into Christ meant the reign of a new kind of equality.

In the last century there were uncovered some of the earliest descriptions we have of church gatherings before the third century, and they are striking. I love how radically different things looked during this period of great persecution. Christians still gathered for the Eucharist, but those services didn't include meals, and some lasted about 15 minutes, because people had to get in and out before they were captured by the authorities. Yet, in this couple of hundred year period, even if they didn't gather for long services, Christians were radically counter-cultural: refusing to serve in the army, refusing to participate in money lending, refusing to recognize Caesar as a God; and those little bands of the hunted claimed that Jesus had overcome the world.

I also love the period of the Irish Renaissance in which bands of Irish monks rode around on horseback, men and women together (to the horror of the Roman Church) bringing the Good News to the Germanic tribes.

The collapse of the Roman Empire seems to have left people in Europe with a deep sense of unworthiness, in part because they were surrounded by the ruins of technologies they no longer knew how to work much less reproduce. The Eucharists we have from this time seem primarily long penitential litanies in which the main focus was on people confessing their feelings of unworthiness. Because they didn't feel worthy to take communion, the high point of the Eucharist became the moment when the priest lifts up the consecrated host for people to look upon.

The Reformation attempted to radically challenge this whole mentality. Calvin said life was about praise, not penitence, and he and the other reformers said people should have communion each week. This met a lot of resistance, so the reformers agreed that people should have communion at least four times a year. Having communion four times a year then became the pattern for the Reformation churches. Like the period in which the Roman empire became officially Christian, the Reformation has a pretty ambiguous legacy, particularly as it frees people to pursue becoming wealthy and embracing capitalism. But there is still so much we take for granted that were vital gifts of the church in this period, such as the whole new concept of honoring the individual.

Today is my mom's 90th Birthday. To me she embodies the community of Jesus that I have embraced in the contemporary Episcopal Church. But it is a church that has changed enormously over the course of her lifetime. I'd like to highlight three of the ways:

First, the church came to embrace and honor secular learning, and what it learned through this scholarship about ancient history, languages, and literary forms, changed our whole understanding of the scriptures. It has helped us to hear the widely different voices that speak to us in the

scriptures and their often contradictory messages, making a life lived in and through the scriptures a whole new ball game.

Second, the Church finally made the shift from having communion rarely to having it regularly. The emphasis on watching the priest do his special thing at the front of the congregation shifted to an emphasis on the church as the people of God, coming before God to be blessed and renewed and sent out into the world.

Third, the church came to grips with the enormous social evils it had tolerated and perpetuated in the form of slavery, the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, religious chauvinism, nationalism, militarism, sexism, homophobia, and it turned away from them.

I could go on and on, but I'll just say that, between 1920 and the present, we became a whole new community.

And this brings us to our challenge, here and now, as this small community, gathered in the Name of Jesus, determines who and what are we being called to be about today and in the coming year. I want to share with you a few of the ways I feel we are being called, and my hope is that they stir you to listen to how you feel you/we are being called.

I have a strong sense that we are being called to grow spiritually and to grow in terms of our membership, and I think the two are interrelated.

In terms of spiritual growth, last night I heard Ritchie Havens sing "All along the Watchtower", and I was struck by Dylan's line: "Let us not talk falsely now--the hour is getting late." I was drawn to Incarnation because of its activism, its commitment to being the Community of Acts of doing things, but I've come to see how much our ability to do justice and make peace is so dependent on our ability to be truthful. When you have been fashioned to be dishonest about who you are, what you feel, what you really think, how you speak to other people, how you listen to other people, this is not easy. I believe the renewal of our species depends on small communities helping each other become people who can face reality as clearly as possible - not in the T-group bludgeoning "I'm going to hit you with a truth I possess" kind of way - but in helping us open the door to who we really are in the light of love, so that we can stand on it and stop selling ourselves and others down the river. So, for me, honest, deep, conversations are at the heart of our spiritual renewal.

Over the last couple of years, these conversations have helped open the door for us to see how much we are in the midst of a tooth and nail struggle against isolation. It's like we're living in the midst of a huge vortex that wants to suck us into isolation, and we have seen what happens when we get isolated: we lose track of what we're really feeling, we compromise our fundamental values, we become filled with shame and guilt, and we have breakdowns and relapses. At its worst, isolation leads to suicide. For me, this means our spiritual agenda is defined first and foremost by whatever helps us to stay connected, to ourselves, to each other, and to the God

that lives within us and among us. I think we have to keep listening for whatever helps us to connect, whether it is the kind of services we have (I'm sensing the contradictory needs of a much greater need for communal joy and much more space for contemplative silence), or the kind of music we sing, whether it is through simply eating together with no other agenda in mind, or practicing inner silence together, or through gardening, or poetry readings, or whatever else. Now, individually, we have very different needs, but if we can develop those practices that help any group of us to connect with ourselves, with each other, and with God in us and among us, then I think the Spirit is freed to work and lead us where we need to go. My sense is that, in the coming year, in this context, which is so dominated by our economic stress, one of our main spiritual challenges is to get better at sharing our needs and sharing our gifts in the midst of our needs, so that we can learn how God can transform scarcity into abundance for our own sake and the sake of others.

There is the issue of membership growth. We need to grow, at least a little. Increasing in membership is perhaps, first and foremost, about staying alive spiritually. It is easy for a community to become an in-group that shuts itself off to what is beyond it. We need to keep listening to others and letting who they are transform us and lead into new areas.

We also need to grow in membership because, like almost all the mainline denominations, we are in the midst of a profound generation shift that is going to create a fundamentally different paradigm from the paradigm of being a church that has been dominant for so long. We need to create the space for the new generations to help determine what it means to be the community of Jesus, here and now.

We also need to grow in numbers, even if it is simply to get back to the size we were before my Sabbatical, because it will give us so much more resources to do the different kinds of ministry we are feeling called to do. Our present size doesn't allow us to have full-time staffing, and given how much everyone is having to work to sustain themselves economically, it appears we need full-time staffing for everyone to be able to share their gifts and for those with a gift to connect with those in need of that gift. That really is the crux of our work as a community--to figure out how to connect the gifts people have with those in need and to connect peoples' needs with the gifts others have to share.

I will also say that, if people are now needing church services to feel like a much more hopeful and energizing space, then it makes a real difference when our Sunday gatherings are a little larger than we currently are. Greater numbers, up to a point, help create a greater amount of energy, and greater diversity helps create a greater chance that someone has the living Word that can feed and sustain us on any given Sunday.

Lastly, Ann Lamott says that God rarely gives her any master plan or directions. All she experiences is being led like a frog from one lily pad to the next. That is certainly how I'm feeling these days. I'm feeling pretty sure about the lily pad I'm supposed to focus on this year, as it relates to spiritual growth and membership growth. However, what's more important, here and

now, is for us to listen to each other in speech so that collectively we can discern where and how we are being called, individually and collectively. So today, instead of a large collective reflection, I am asking you to break up into groups of about four or five and take 1-2 minutes each to do a go-around, in which each person, who wants to, can share their reflections on two things:

- 1- What are one or two things I'm feeling called to do or be about these days?
- 2- What are one or two things I feel Incarnation is being called to do or be about in the coming year?