

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Reverend Earl Grout

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 25, 2011

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21. 23—32

Ekklesia/Community

“This is our turf,” say the chief priests and elders. “What do you think you’re doing?” It’s a fair question. Healing and teaching, Jesus has been doing extraordinary things. He proclaims an authentic religion of the heart, the inner purity and union with God that he lives in and yearns to share. The lust or anger in your heart, he teaches, matter as much as acts of adultery and murder. Pray privately with an open heart, he says, rather than publicly to impress others. He violates the Sabbath by doing the work of healing, and challenges the priests who have no problem rescuing livestock or circumcising on the holy day. He attacks the formalisms and legalities of religion in stories like the Good Samaritan where the observant Jews pass by the injured man lest they become ritually impure by touching him. By blocking the money changers in the temple, he obstructs the system of animal sacrifice. In everything he does, Jesus draws on deep Jewish tradition. “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps 51.17). No wonder he approves the lawyer who sums up the whole Law with this: “There is one God, and next to him are none. And to love him with one’s entire heart, entire mind, and entire effort, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself—that is more important than any kind of burnt offering or sacrifice” (Mk 12. 32—32).

The woman at the well, in John, hesitates to draw Jesus the water he requested, because as a Samaritan and a woman, it would be unclean if she touches it. He tells her that he is bringing water than cannot be defiled, the “living water” of inner purity, and “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (4.14). The life he brings

does not depend on external cleansings. Its fruits are justice and compassion—the kingdom of God where there are no hungry or homeless, where none are despised or excluded, where there is a place for everybody.

40 years later, the Romans razed the temple, but Jesus had already shaken its foundations. In him it was already becoming a thing of the past. Replacing it would be a religion of the heart, the inner purity called for by the prophets and the covenant, centered in him as the embodiment of God’s love. “He is bringing a new stage of religion—all religion—one not based on externalities and foreshadowings,” says scholar Garry Wills, “but on the revelation of the Father in Jesus.” He is where we encounter God, whether gathered here in community or wherever we are day to day.

Jesus opposed the religion of his day that was proud of its virtue, self righteous—quick to judge and condemn. He rejected its fixation on exalted hierarchy, fine trappings and monumental buildings. He condemned—just as the prophets before him—its neglect of the poor and outcast and cultivation of the rich and powerful. Legalistic, exclusionary religion is always at odds with Jesus. It still is. When Jesus fed the five thousand, he didn’t check their religious credentials. He just fed them. So do we.

“Where did the baptism of John come from?” Jesus asks the priests and elders. Their response? “We do not know.” It is their duty to distinguish between true and false prophets. They should have known who Jesus was. John

gave them some pretty good clues. But they take the route of expediency, saying what it is safe to say. Preserving the institution and their place of power within it for them take priority over truth and justice. They stand self-condemned. Sound familiar? It's happening today.

The two sons are timeless images of our imperfection. Profession versus practice. Ideally the two should be joined, but here we have a real human moment: sanctimonious piety without performance on the one hand, and on the other churlish performance spoiling the good work done. No one is being praised here, but if you have to take one over the other, the point is to take practice over profession. "The tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you," he tells the priests. They listened to John and opened their hearts to God in spite of their cynicism and irreligiousness. As comedian Lenny Bruce said, "Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God." Spiritual but not religious, maybe?

Originally the church was not the power structure it became. It was called "ekklesia"—Greek for gathering. Its energy and cohesion flow from the personal presence of Jesus: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mt 18.20). Still happens, here and now. This pattern is distinct from gatherings that claim a descent in appointed authority from Jesus. Exclusionary religion—the opposite of what Jesus embodied—flows from such claims. This too still happens.

Gathered together in worship and sharing the sacred meal, we are united with God by being united with Jesus. Walking out of here and into world, we are nourished for the journey. It is being here in community that makes it possible to walk that walk day after day.

Community is the heart of our faith and is everywhere in its imagery. We see God as an interactive community in the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is not good for God to be alone. So we are invited to join in. The heavenly banquet is the principal image of the afterlife, and was foreshadowed by Jesus in the great feedings of the four and five thousand and in the last supper, which we reenact weekly in our Eucharist. It is the congregation that becomes Christ in the Eucharist: we are the body of Christ, as Paul says, "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (I Cor 10.17). To paraphrase Paul in Galatians, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, gay or straight, HIV+ or not, married or single, young or old, "for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3.28). Where do you fit? Right here.

Community is where we find ourselves by locating ourselves among others. Our shared journey is the search for the same spiritual reality—that of personal redemption, wholeness and healing, oneness with God. This quest of a lifetime never takes place in a vacuum. Genuine spiritual growth is a communal enterprise, exactly counter to our cultural myth of go-it-alone individualism. Religion is not something you do by yourself. When I understood this, I got back into church after many years.

Community is co-intentional, according to one of my favorite books, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. Community requires the recognition and acceptance of mutuality. We are all in this together. We practice the qualities of mutuality. Among them are honesty—the humility and willingness to learn—identification, which means we strive to follow Jesus in his life of compassionate self-giving, and listening, giving up our self-centered view of the world. Spiritual dilemmas don't need answers, they need presence. This gives new meaning to a famous line in one of

Ring Lardner's novels: "'Shut up,' he explained." Being there means more than anything we can say. Our life together in worship, learning and service signal and shape our internal beliefs and attitudes. As we do, we become. We need each other to become what we ought to be. Community precedes and gives birth to faith.

So don't worry about whether you firmly believe this, that, or six impossible things before breakfast. Just feed Jesus in the hungry, in whatever hunger you meet. And let him feed you in your faith community.

Resurrection happens now. Jesus is resurrected in us through the Holy Spirit which crosses all cultural barriers, and love is its common language. There is an old story of a tour of heaven and hell. In both places there is a sumptuous banquet table set before guests who all have two-foot long utensils strapped to their arms. In hell everyone is starving, because they are trying to feed themselves. In heaven, they are joyful and satisfied, because—you guessed it—they are feeding each other.

Our journey toward God is rooted in community, but it won't do us any good if we are not part of it. For community to be real, there are two things we have to do. First we join. If you are new to Saint Mark's or have been hovering on the edges and haven't joined, please do. Fill out the form online or check with the office. Second, we pledge. The kingdom of God is not off in fairy land. It appears among us as a community in Christ, day to day as we live our lives and as we gather weekly in this place to be replenished and renewed. Our pledges sustain the community life that sustains our life in faith. We will be hearing more in the weeks to come about supporting our community. Let's plan on doing it.

And may God richly bless our lives together with hearts to love, hands to serve, and abundance to share as we walk the pilgrims' way together. Amen.