

LOOK WHO GATHERS AT CHRIST'S TABLE

I Cor. 11: 23-26; Luke 22: 14-23

Every once in a while, I see someone look up with surprise when they experience a moment where God seems to be almost visible. I find myself saying, "The Holy Spirit is truly present." Sometimes things just seem to fall into place, but then we wonder, "How is that so?"

There are some, like Karl Barth, who believed that God was the "Holy Other" out there some place waiting for us to find a way to connect. If we only pray hard enough, or do enough good works that it please God, then God will see fit to come into our being.

But for me, I loved the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, another German theologian who believed that God is a part of us from the moment we are born and our intellect begins to function. There is the spirit of God that assisted our parents in our creation and is with us every day of our lives. In fact, our job is not to go out there and find God, but to look deep inside and communicate with the God who lives within us. It is out of that God that all good works emerge. Just as we study and learn and experience life and act on that knowledge, we also come to hear that still small voice within us. It is that voice that inspires us to use what we have learned to make good decisions, to reach out to others and make a difference in God's world.

I believe that it is when we are out of synch with our inner being that things go wrong – major errors in judgment are made. Sin happens. Just as in our personal lives, I believe the Holy Spirit also directs the ministry of this church. It had better! Our church staff and leaders work so hard, always on the move, always planning and dealing with the various issues that arise. But deep in the spirit of each and every one of us is that spirit of Christ helping us along. And once in a while, we identify with it in a powerful way. Sometimes through the simplest statement.

This past week, during a staff meeting I was talking about the purpose of the church and that while we must be aware of and be good stewards financially, our main focus must be to teach and preach Christ's word. I said, "I thought that's what Jesus had in mind." One of our staff members lay her head on the table and said, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Something touched her heart and called from within – yes, yes, yes! That is Christ's ministry.

I believe Christ is with us when we head off to make a hospital or a nursing home call – we pray and ask that God will give us the right words and help us listen carefully to the need of the other. I believe the Holy Spirit is working when I give John Dale my sermon titles and scriptures and he chooses music and begins to imagine how that music will help the congregation to assimilate the breaking open of the word that day within that special medium of music.

I believe each one of our church leaders, if they listen and pray carefully, can feel the Holy Spirit helping them to make the right choices and decisions not just about the present but about the future of Plymouth Church. But we all have to listen.

Well, that is what happened with the service this morning. The theme of this service is to look at the ministry of the church and who in society needs an invitation to join us. It confronts us with a question: Are all God's children, no matter their circumstance or infirmity, represented at the table of the Lord in this place?

And so I asked that a table be set and that various members of the church make up place settings that would help us visualize who should be at the table and what kind of ministry we might offer to the

community. The table set before you is the culmination of that visionary process. The Spirit was their guide.

You see, I believe this is exactly what happened in the early church. The followers of Jesus began to tell of his life, death and resurrection. It was not safe – they were persecuted for even telling stories about Jesus. But they had to tell. And so they developed symbols – like those represented this morning.

One place setting depicts the symbol of a fish – used by the early Christians to identify one another. If walking on sand while greeting another, they would draw the picture of the fish in the sand. It was a signal to the other that they were safe to speak of Jesus. The next place setting represents fellowship – the handshake. Did you know that early Christians would shake the hand of another and draw a fish with their thumb? If the other person responded, they would know they were one of the followers. They also used a special kind of handshake where they would wrap their hands around the other person's hand, indicating that they were receiving the Holy Spirit from that person and would pass it on to another.

Our ministry is immense – just as the early followers discovered. We feed the hungry – not just with food for the body, but spiritual food as well. They prayed together, sang and danced and offered help to those in need. They pooled their resources to follow Christ's instructions.

Today, we find ourselves looking for ways to bring housing to the homeless through Habitat and other shelters throughout the city. We bring clothing to help them find employment and job training. There are those who are ill and we minister to them in powerful ways, not only through our prayers, but through our lay ministry program. I wonder if you have any idea of the amount of time and talent and training involved in our Lay Ministry program and the ministry they provide to dozens of our members and friends each month through their visits and phone calls and assistance.

Those who are injured or have had surgery receive hospital visits from our pastors and lay ministers and that ministry is represented at the table today with bandages, representing the mending of heart and soul and body.

Finally, today we represent those who are mentally ill and the need for the Church of Jesus Christ to always be aware of those who are in need of a spiritual foundation when their mind ceases to function in reality. A spiritual grounding can bring someone back from the brink. If someone knows they are not alone and that someone cares, it can be the breakthrough needed to the journey toward wellness.

Paul tried to tell the early followers exactly how Communion should be celebrated, and yet I have witnessed the spirit of God during retreats where groups that have used Ritz crackers. Just like the covenants made with Moses in long past times, this covenant was brand new. This one was for everyone, not just those of importance, but for the least among them – and us.

This day, as we receive the bread and the cup, we are all brothers and sisters. Are there others who need to be invited? What are we going to do about that? Amen.

Sermon preached by
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