

July 31, 2011

Sermon: What Makes a Church?

Deuteronomy 7: 7-11

1 Corinthians 1: 1-19

How much do you know about 1 Corinthians? Did you know that it really isn't Paul's first letter to this Church in Corinth? No, this is most likely at least his second. He is very aware as he writes this letter what is going on and what he intends to say. And did you know that there wasn't just one Church in Corinth even though his letter sort of says so? No there were several, but Paul address this letter to just the Church because theologically that is what his message was going to be about.

Our scripture today is only the very beginning of his letter, his introduction. And although we know the main message is not contained in these verses, he still has a lot to say. He wants to explain what the church is. There are many definitions of what the church is. I am sure that each of you has your own. Sometimes our conception of church is expressed by a mission statement. Community United Methodist's sounds like this:

"As followers of Jesus Christ responding to His love, we show our faith through our actions and service in our church, community and world."

Our mission statements reflect what we believe our actions as the church look like in the world. Here at CUMC we respond as followers of Jesus Christ, and our actions are to an expression of the love he showed us. Our faith makes us desire to serve our church, community and the world.

Some definitions aren't as complimentary or as inspiring.

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition, which needs illusions.

In the above quotation by Karl Marx he is saying that religion's purpose is to create illusory fantasies for the poor. Economic realities prevent them from finding true happiness in this life, so religion tells them that this is OK because they will find true happiness in the next life. Although this is a criticism of religion, Marx is not without sympathy. He says people are in distress and religion provides solace, just as people who are physically injured receive relief from opiate-based drugs.

Another disheartening description comes from CS Lewis' book the Screwtape Letters. The story is about letters from a devil named Screwtape to his nephew on earth named Wormwood. Wormwood is charged with keeping his patient in the clutches of the devil. In one of the letters, Screwtape rebukes Wormwood because his patient has become a Christian, but he tells Wormwood not to worry about the situation because here is his view of the church.

One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out though all time and space and rooted in eternity...Fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans. All your

patient sees is the half-finished sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy, which neither of them understands. When he gets to his pew and looks around him he sees just the selection of his neighbors whom he has hitherto avoided. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like “the body of Christ” and the actual faces in the next pew.

What the devil is saying is that although Wormwood’s patient has become a Christian, he has not taken his faith to heart. This new Christian is just attending church, not accepting the message, not understanding that learning to love and follow Jesus is about learning to love his neighbor that he avoids. This new Christina is about the face value of attending church and not the heart value of believing in church.

Are you familiar with Willow Creek Church in the Chicago area? It serves a congregation of 24,000. After seeing a documentary on it in my Christianity in Contemporary Society class I would call it the Church of market research. That is exactly how it was founded. A market research study was done to find out why people do not attend church. They discovered that too many religious items, such as crosses made people uncomfortable so they removed them. They made the worship area much less religious and much more event like, so that all those that had not been raised in the church but had been raised going to concerts and sporting events would feel at home. Same thing with the style of worship, much more like events much less like worship. Basically from the type of building to the

style of worship it was designed for these un-churched people to be comfortable inside. I do think they talk a little about God...hope so.

A more positive opinion and for us United Methodists an important one, is what John Wesley says this about the church.

“The catholic or universal Church is, all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be one body united by one Spirit, having one faith, one hope, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all, and through all and in them all.”

Finally here is what our United Methodist Book of Discipline says:

In Article XIII – The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

The mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. By proclaiming the good news of God’s grace and by exemplifying Jesus’ command to love God and neighbor, thus seeking the fulfillment of God’s reign and realm in the world.

Now lets go back to the first century and see what Paul has to say.

He begins with a classic Hellenistic greeting. He expresses both his perception of himself and his perception of the congregation. How does he see himself? He writes with confidence letting them know that he has something important to say.

This confidence is not about him but it is about who he perceives himself to be which is “called by God.” Paul is called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.

Second how does he see the people of Corinth? He says they are “sanctified in Christ”.

Now Paul is under no illusion about the problems in Corinth. But he begins the letter by affirming and reminding the congregation who they are. He wants them to understand that they are set apart from the world. They are “those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus to be saints”. The church can be called to what God intends it to be only when we have a clear perception of who these people are and how grace has brought them to this place.

So Paul continues by giving thanks for the “grace of God that has been given to you in Christ Jesus”.

Paul then tells the church of Corinth more about themselves. He recognizes that they have gifts, that they have been enriched and that they have knowledge. Now because we know what Paul is about to say in this letter we also know that these are the very things that have gotten the people into trouble. Not the gifts themselves but how and where they believe they received these gifts. The concern is that there is arrogance about how wealthy and knowledgeable they are. These gifts came from God not from their own abilities a topic that Paul will soon be discussing in this letter.

What is really important for the Church at Corinth is that they realize that they have what it takes to be a really shining example of what God intended his church on earth to be. That the only thing that is keeping them from reaching this ideal is really they own egos. It is this egocentric thinking that has also caused some of the congregation to consider that they already have it all. That the kingdom has come and there is nothing more to work for hence there is time for squabbles about who is the most correct or who is practicing the doctrine the best.

So Paul's is taking the positive approach and reminding them that their gifts and knowledge will be important also in the future, that future day when Christ really returns and his Kingdom is made present on the earth. A nice way to say, hey don't think you have all the answers quite yet.

The first nine verses in Corinthians are a lead up; Paul is getting ready to really address the concerns he has for the Church. However he has couched them in a positive form that supports and hopefully reminds the Corinthians of what their mission truly is. It isn't too far off from a classic letter you might have received. It's the one we receive if we have submitted a resume, or a story for publication or if we have brought up a new idea to the church council. A wise leader will say, this is a really good idea, and you have always brought such great information to the council. We can tell that you work hard on all that you do and we appreciate your effort. You are a worthwhile and valued employee. The person in charge is letting you know that he is taking you seriously and thinks highly of you before using the word we are all waiting for. You have done a great job.... But

That is where Paul is. He is just about to deliver, pardon the expression the big but...In verse 10 he begins "Now I appeal to you" basically now that I have reminded who I am, who you are and what the church is suppose to be I am about to set straight some places that you may have strayed from the path.

So that is what I ask today. What is our church, we don't have Paul to tell us how Community United Methodist is doing. We have to examine that for ourselves. We can draw from the examples I have given, lets not use Marx, or Willow Creek or the Screwtape Letters. Lets instead draw our comparison to Wesley or the Discipline. Lets think about the mission statement of this church. How do these examples Communities, Wesley and the Discipline match up to what Paul is saying into the Corinthians?

Do we think we know it all, that we are wealthy in the spirit? Do we allow our own egos to cause arguments that are meaningless or divisionary? Have we forgotten that we too look to the future reign of God on earth? Are we very similar to the congregation in Corinth? I think that all of us can see ourselves in the situation that Paul describes in these nine short verses.

Paul is about to get very specific about the problems in the church. In the next verses he will elaborate about what makes the church. If you have time and want to investigate all Paul said read the whole letter. It is not very long and I think it really hits home. Some of very same issues we that trouble us today, were trouble 2000 years ago. Self examination is scary and sometimes hurtful and always uncomfortable but let me leave you with this.

Paul says this to the Corinthian Church then and he says it to us today.....

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind- just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sending forth:

Let us;

Serve our God with patience and passion.

Be deliberate in enacting our faith.

Be steadfast in celebrating the Spirit's power.

And may peace be your way in the world. Amen