

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 17, September 27, 2009, dedicated to the 42 men and women who stepped out in faith to oppose slavery and to form this community of faith, to Katherine, Scott, Veronica, our Gladden scholars who follow in his footsteps, to James E. Bobb on his day of installation as our Minister of Music, and always to the glory of God!

“Faithful to Community”

***Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22;
Mark 9:38-50***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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There is a lot of instruction about discipleship taking place in these 12 verses of Mark. Today’s passage opens with a teaching on true discipleship (vs.38-40); how to practice hospitality among disciples (vs. 41); taking care not to offend new disciples (vs. 42); the moral imperatives and earnestness of living the life of a disciple (vs. 43-49); and finally, the call to unity among the disciples (vs. 50). In a nutshell: true discipleship, hospitality, taking in new disciples, how to live the life of a disciple, and how to be unified in Christ.

Embedded in these instructions are four valuable lessons. Let’s take a closer look.

Lesson #1: Saying someone is “not one of us” doesn’t cut it as adequate criterion to keep a person away from Christianity (Mark 9:38-40). Granted, in the early church, with assaults of life and limb

happening every day, the question of “Who is one of us?” had life and death implications. The Gospels and Paul’s writings are packed with determinants for who is in and who is out. Ethical conduct (Matthew 7:16,21-23), doctrinal confession (I John 4:2), confession of Jesus as Lord and service to others (I Corinthians 12:1-7) are all named as measures of true discipleship, but “not being one of us” is never included.

We don’t belong to a club, we belong to a “faith community.” We never have a “green light” to look around and say someone isn’t “one of us.” If we do this, we simply aren’t disciples of Christ. Exclusion in Christ is not allowed.

In his book *The Different Drummer*, the late M. Scott Peck speaks of the true meaning of community. In our culture, which emphasizes “rugged individualism,” a condition in which we feel we cannot be totally honest even with the person in the pew next to us, we kick around the word “community” almost as a decoy, says Peck. We refer to community as our town or city, or church or school, our fraternal organization or apartment complex or our professional association. While this may be true, a true community is one in which the individuals communicate honestly (beyond the masks of formality) and have developed the ability to laugh together and mourn together.

As Peck writes, a true community has many ingredients. It is first and foremost, inclusive. It is a place of commitment, that is, a place where people show the willingness to coexist. It is a place of consensus, in which people work together to find the best way forward, not simply the way that casts out some and includes others. Community is realistic, dealing with a vast array of possibilities and centering on a way forward. It is contemplative, seeking the power of God in prayer discernment to “work together for good” in facing each day and every dilemma. It is a safe place – a place where you can cry, be angry, be silent and be healed. It is a place where people can fight gracefully. It is a place where you are personally disarmed. That is, we have to lay aside our issues to receive other people and in the process be changed by what we might encounter. It is a place where God’s

spirit is felt and called upon with belief that God's spirit will "come by here." (Drawn from M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drummer*, Touchstone Books, 1987, Chapter 3, pp. 59-76).

But, first and foremost, community is about inclusion.

Lesson #2: Hospitality is to be practiced freely and with minimal requirements (Mark 9:41). As Jesus says, even a cup of cold water given and received is not to be unnoticed or unrewarded. I believe the three most important words we have in our language are "please" and "thank you." I am always impressed by people who use them well.

Not long ago, I was tutoring a fourth-grader who said "please" and "thank you" all the time in our interaction. Finally, I asked the child, "Where have you learned to use 'please' and 'thank you' so well?" She answered, "My great-grandparents." I said, "Your great-grandparents?" She smiled and said, "Yes." "How old are they?" I asked. She said, "They are OLD . . . I think around 75."

Then she went on to say that they believed that "Please" and "Thank you," are words that her generation was losing, because her parents had forgotten them. She said, "Great-grandmother wants me to keep these words alive for my children." I responded, "Please do . Thank you for doing this." Be hospitable to everyone you meet. We are at our best when we serve other people. When we reach out and offer a cup of blessing to others, we become real, true disciples of Christ.

Every Sunday, Bob Roberts arrives early to church. Despite battling ALS, Bob sets up and serves the choir breakfast on the second floor of our parish house. As they arrived back for the fall two weeks ago, I could smell great food simmering in the choir room kitchen. Meanwhile, each week, Nancy Burba works as a volunteer to help us serve the food and fellowship after the 11 a.m. service. We wouldn't come together each week, if Nancy didn't help us do it. "Thank you Bob and Nancy for setting the standard of hospitality so high. May we (please) follow in their gracious footsteps."

There are so many shining examples of hospitable and loving disciples at First Church. Rev. Barb Cunningham teaches me daily through her loving and gracious example how to extend grace and hospitality to others. “Thank you,” Barb! I offer a sweeping “thank you” to all of you who practice kindness and hospitality. When we serve with grace and hospitality, we are true disciples of Christ.

Lesson #3: New converts are to be accorded special care and consideration (Mark 9:42). There is nothing more beautiful in the church than a new convert to Jesus Christ! I love the laughter, love, curiosity and delight that new people bring to community. You know what I mean! The questions are fresh. The smiles are unmarked by the turning of time. When a “newbie” comes among us, they help us to see ourselves and who are and what we do with new eyes.

Years ago, a new person came to me and asked for a private conversation. They were curious about something. We were in the process of becoming an open and affirming church. We were studying all the questions. With furrowed brows, we were examining the deep meanings of racism, regular sexism, heterosexism and all the issues listed (in positive form) on the back of our Sunday bulletin.

The budding and hopeful, young and bubbly convert came into my office at the scheduled time. She sat down and after a bit of opening conversation, leaned in and asked, “Why are we spending so much time talking about gay and lesbian people in the church? I don’t know much about him, but didn’t Jesus say we should love everyone?” She paused and continued, “Don’t people in church BELIEVE we should love everyone?” As we talked, it was clear to me that the young woman sitting in front of me really didn’t know how much prejudice and hatred GLBT Christians had faced. She really was an innocent and clear and honest as she appeared to be with her opening question. We talked. She cried. In her clarity and innocence, she couldn’t believe followers of Jesus wouldn’t welcome and love everyone. I felt like I was meeting a 1st century disciple who was meeting Jesus for the first time. It was beautiful.

As we seek to live into the beauty and fullness of love and discipleship in community, let us carry these words, penned by a 13-year-old Jewish girl over 65 years ago while hiding from the Nazis in an attic. Her name was Anne Frank. She wrote:

*I can feel the suffering of millions
and yet, if I look up into the heavens,
I think it will all come right,
and that this cruelty too will end,
and that peace and tranquility will return again.
In the meantime,
I must uphold my ideals,
for perhaps the time will come
when I will be able to carry them out.*

In community, let us give special care to those who are new among us and see the world with fresh and clear eyes. I guarantee, they will teach us our faith all over again.

Lesson #4: The life of a disciple must be morally earnest in as much as our present behavior has eternal consequences (vs. 43-50). Mark ends this pericope with lots of fiery, purposeful imagery. Jesus talks of cutting off hands, feet and gauging out eyes. It is brutal imagery (which is why I said earlier that we should be thankful we take the Bible seriously and not literally). Jesus is trying to make a point. To be a disciple takes sacrifice.

Jesus calls upon his disciples to reflect upon their own style of life and ministry. He tells them to examine themselves and ask if there is anything they are doing that will prevent them from a full, sincere and energetic service to God. He uses some powerful (and disturbing) images of things that prevent service to God. But Jesus is pushing his disciples to live fully into a wholehearted commitment to God's divine reign. He doesn't want them to lose their flavor, their distinction, their uniqueness in the society and culture of which they are apart. He wants the same for us. He wants us to be disciples of

the highest order. He wants us to be salty Christians (in word AND IN DEED)! To be “salty” means to step up and speak out for the things which really matter in our times – health care for all, justice for all and hope for those who have lost sight of hope.

To be disciples of Christ is a big job. It’s not easy being a Christian. But if easy is what you are after, you would not be at First Church. “Easy Street” was not the street this congregation was founded on 157 years ago. You don’t set out to end slavery thinking that’s easy!

Near the end of life, our greatest pastor, Dr. Washington Gladden wrote these words in his autobiography:

“When I was a boy, the main reason urged for being a Christian was a selfish reason. It was insurance against loss; it was the personal gain, the personal happiness, the future blessedness of which it put you in possession, that were constantly kept before your mind. That motive has been steadily retreating into the background; the motive of unselfish service has been increasingly emphasized. Because the Christian life is the noblest life, because it is more blessed to give than to receive; and better to minister than be ministered unto, because the good life is not found in separating yourself from your fellows, but by identifying yourself with them - therefore, let us be Christians.”

The most important thing for Dr. Gladden was “friendship.” In *Recollections* he concludes his beliefs about Christian faith:

“I am fain to believe that the time is drawing near when the Christian Church will be able to discern and declare the simple truth that religion is nothing but Friendship, friendship with God and with all people. I have been thinking about it in these last days, and I cannot make anything else, so far as I can see it, this is all there is to it. Religion is Friendship - friendship first with the Great Companion, of whom Jesus told us, is always nearer to us than we are to ourselves, and whose inspiration and help us the

greatest fact of human experience. To be in harmony with God's purposes, to be open to his suggestions, to be in conscious fellowship with Him - this is religion on its Godward side.

"Then, turning manward, friendship sums it all up. To be friends with everybody, to fill every human relation with the spirit of friendship, is there anything more than this, that the wisest and best of Men (and women) can hope to do?"

As we go out today, let us carry Dr. Gladden's words in our hearts. Let us be continually grow in friendship with God and other people. And friends, in the words of Jesus found in Mark 9:50 our final lesson for today, "Let us be at peace with one another." Amen.