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Lent 4 A, March 19, 2023

Liturgy 9: "Calling a Friend – Congregation and Community"

Read Acts 2: 42 – 47;/memorize Acts 2: 42

Sixty years ago, I entered Concordia Preparatory Institute. Yes, I was institutionalized. It might explain a lot about me. Those of us who attended the Prep, a residential high school. We called it Bronxville, because of its location. It was very small, about 130 guys. There was one of three reasons to be there: You wanted to be a pastor; your parents wanted a private school or you were a problem and had flunked out elsewhere and they hoped the school would straighten you out.

Tish describes her friend, Rebekka as a "friend of my right hand." This is the friend that stays by you and holds onto you and to whom you can say anything at any time and know that you will be accepted. I met my "friend of the right hand" at Bronxville. His name is Barry. We have been best friends for 60 years.

When tragedy struck my family, for two years Barry called me every weekend to see how we were doing. I knew and he knew, that if either one of us said to the other, I need you to come, we would put down everything we had to do and go to the aid of that friend. Very few friendships grow to that depth. Perhaps you've experienced one?

In Christian worship, we do this odd thing, we talk to each other. I'll say "The peace of the Lord be with you;" you respond "And with you also." I'll say "Let us pray" and you'll join me in prayer. But our talking isn't just to ourselves. In those "call and response times," we are also talking to God.

In the church, God is always part of the conversation for He created it. He began that conversation when He called Abraham to be the father of a great nation. He continued it at Pentecost, where 3,000 people became followers of Jesus.

Hebrews and Christians were called by God to carry out a mission, to make Him known. But we are also gathered together to worship God, care for one another, and carry out His ministry to this world. For Christians we talk about being "the hands and feet of Jesus" in this world. We do that by Word, Sacrament and action.

The church is essential to God's mission of redemption and salvation. As early as the second century, Cyprian of Carthage expressed it this way, "Outside the church there is

no salvation.” Cyprian held that God created the church, empowered it by the Holy Spirit and infused it by Jesus’ Body and Blood to become the means by which God would redeem all people. That mission has never changed.

Luther got even more specific: “Therefore he who would find Christ must first find the Church. How should we know where Christ and his faith were, if we did not know where his believers are? And he who would know anything of Christ must not trust himself nor build a bridge to heaven by his own reason; but he must go to the Church, attend and ask her. Now the Church is not wood and stone, but the company of believing people; one must hold to them, and see how they believe, live and teach; they surely have Christ in their midst. For outside of the Christian church there is no truth, no Christ, no salvation.”

In the last two hundred years there has been a change in focus from a community of believers to a personal relationship with Jesus. Sometimes, those who hold that view don’t see the need to gather together or serve with other believers because they have their own personal faith.

The dilemma is that when we hold that viewpoint, faith and church becomes an individual thing and that was not God’s intention. Paul emphasized that we are joined together as the Body of Christ, where we live in relationship to Jesus and each other.

There are some problems the church needed to confront. The first is not of its making. We live in such an affluent society that many have come to believe they don’t need God. They don’t recognize God as the giver of all things or that He gives to those who believe and who don’t.

As we look at the early followers of Jesus, we know that they were not the people who had it made. The accusation the Pharisees made of Jesus, “Your master eats with sinners and publicans.” was entirely true. Those were the people who saw their need for a Savior. Many in our culture do not.

Finally, the church has created a crisis of faith. It has been a blight on the church, a history of institutional abuse. Many times, sexual in nature; sometimes demeaning of women. Sometimes, destructive of cultural history and including sexual abuse. In many instances people knew about this, but remained silent. For those sins the church has suffered. It has lost trust.

Luther reminds us that we are saints and sinners. We are never one or the other, we are always both and. Just because you are part of the church and a believer in Jesus, does not make you perfect. You are still saint and sinner.

To regain trust takes honesty, humility, confession and reconciliation to heal those wounds. Some of it has to happen personally; some of it has to happen institutionally, but we must recognize that the institution is composed of people. It is only when we, as the people of God, hold those values that the church will also represent them.

We Lutherans believe that the individual congregation is a creation of God. We are not here just because we live in Canandaigua, NY and this was a nice church. God has called each one of us to be here. He has gathered us together to accomplish His mission in Canandaigua, beyond it and throughout the whole world. Our vision can never be anything less than that.

We are part of the “one holy, catholic and Apostolic church.” It is the universal church that proclaims Jesus as Lord. Other Christian churches are not our competition. We are all charged, as the Body of Christ, to carry out the mission of making disciples.

Gathering is vitally important to followers of Jesus. Perhaps, that’s why Jesus reminds us that “... where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.” It is important that we never forget that.

He also wants us to gather for another important reason. When we eat and drink, we are mysteriously joined with all of those who are and have ever been in Christ. It is a part of the “already, but not yet.” of last week. We gather with Jesus at His table today, while looking forward to the time when we will eat with Him in heaven with all believers of all times.

As Tish reminds us, “But if Christianity is not only about my individual connection with God, but is instead about God calling, forming, saving and redeeming people, then the church can never be relegated to the ‘elective’ status.” We want to remember that Jesus did not send His Holy Spirit only to individuals, He sent it to all those who would come to believe in Him.”

I can say with certainty that there will always be a church. Jesus says, “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” We look forward to that day while recognizing the importance of this day.

We remember that group of twelve who walked with Him and followed Him; who learned from Him. He sent them out into the world to carry out His ministry. He created a community. It is a community of which we are part but also a community in which we shall someday take part in, in a larger way. Once again that “already, but not yet.” They told their stories, so that we would be able to tell our stories of how Jesus has changed our lives.

One of the reasons we want to know about people like Cyprian of Carthage, Augustine, Aquinas, D. L. Moody, Martin Luther, the Wesley brothers, and all those who have gone before us is because they have added to the church by their faithfulness. God plans for our names to be counted among them also

As we look at the church we look with hope. Reminding ourselves that despite sin, failure and pain God is making something new and beautiful. He is working in each one of us, dwelling in us through the Holy Spirit so that we can be what God planned the church to be. To do that, we have to face up to what the church is sometimes as we look for what God wants it to be.

God loves us and calls us to love each other. He calls us to love those who don't look like us, dress like us or act like us. We do that one person at a time. We remember that we are saints and sinners. All enter the church the same way by baptism, confession absolution, recognizing that the only way we can love others is to love that particular person.

God has placed us here in Canandaigua to be the church. We are all broken and need healing. Yet, we are also the Body of Christ. We are part of that call and response that God has gathered around His Son, Jesus Christ. God wants us to create friendships that last eternally through Jesus.

As the Body of Christ, gathered in the name of Jesus, we carry out His mission by speaking the Good News to the all. As the hands and feet of Jesus we gather to worship, serve and share in the table that joins us together with all the saints, in all time. We remember that we welcome the stranger, feed the hungry and care for those in need because they belong to Jesus also. All this we do in His Name. As the church, worshipping and serving Jesus, is our joy and celebration in life together!

Count me in: (select one)

1. Call or visit a friend, especially one you haven't seen in a long time. Pray together and let him or her know how God used him or her in your life.
2. Attend church in person this coming weekend. If you know a friend, be sure to check in with them. If not, meet new people as you can.
3. Spend time reading, studying and meditating on 1 Corinthians 12: 12 – 27.