

Community ~ April 13, 2008

Acts 2:42-47; I Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10; Psalm 23

We have heard a lot about religious communes of the worst type in the past several years and days. It seems that those that betray people, decency and God are the ones that attract the most attention. This is nothing new. There have always been cults and communes in existence that have been created to serve something or someone other than what they claim to serve. But there also are many more communities of faith that strive to do nothing but good. That was the case with the earliest communities of faith formed by the followers of Jesus.

Our scripture readings tell us of the love the members of these communities had for one another and the ways they supported themselves. They sold all they had and held everything in common. We don't know how many of these groups existed, but those that did gave our faith a solid base from which to grow and develop. We need to remember that they considered these communities as short-lived groups—Jesus would be returning soon and would take them with him to be with God.

These communities were probably modeled on the sheepfold mentioned in the Gospel of John. A strong and unquestioning faith in the message of Christ was required for admittance. I am sure there was not a great deal of latitude allowed in what the members believed because it was essential that they survive and carry on the mission of Jesus by sharing the “good news” of his life, teachings, death and resurrection. As our faith system has evolved, a broader perspective has emerged in many Christian denominations.

To keep these early communities of faith alive, the members had to offer a great deal of hospitality to others. The ability to offer such hospitality is required of us in our day and age if we are to remain viable witnesses to the message of Jesus.

The late Henri Nouwen addressed the need to create hospitable spaces for others in the formation of community. In his little book, Reaching Out—The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life, he wrote:

Old and New Testament stories not only show how serious our obligation is to welcome the stranger in our home, but they also tell us that guests are carrying precious gifts with them, which they are eager to reveal to a receptive host. (p.66)

He is telling us that when someone new comes to us, as individuals or as a community of faith, we need to be receptive to the good that comes to us with them. Everyone has value in the eyes of God and everyone carries with them special talents that can be encouraged.

As people pulled together to put on the reception we had yesterday, following Alma's memorial service, I marveled at their talents. Those involved just went about their business doing what needed to be done and they created a space of hospitality for those they were serving. It is a beautiful thing when this happens. Sometimes we tend to protect our special territory and believe that no one else can do a job as well as we can. We find, when we open the doors to others that “many hands make light work” and that others, while not doing things “my way” can be equally effective.

Nouwen goes on to remind us:

Hospitality, therefore, means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. It is not to lead our neighbor into a corner where there are no alternatives left, but to open a wide spectrum of options for choice and commitment. It is not an educated intimidation with good books, good stories and good works but the liberation of fearful hearts so that words can find roots and bear ample fruit. It is not a method of making our God and our way into the criteria of happiness, but the opening of an opportunity to others to find their God and their way. The paradox of hospitality is that it wants to create emptiness, not a fearful emptiness, but a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations. Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the life style of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own. (p. 71-72)

Nouwen's words should speak very clearly to us as a community of faith. As Congregationalists, we require no creedal agreement as to what it is we will believe. Instead we ask that each individual discover his or her pathway to God while existing in a hospitable, safe space to do all the exploration and questioning necessary. This is a real strength and yet a real weakness in our system of faith. No one person can tell others what we all believe and hold dear. That is why it is very important for us to show our faith through our words and deeds. Theological positions can be very safe and comforting but that is not where the practice of our faith lies. The practice of our faith is best shown in the way we work together and, sometimes, struggle together in our community. Gradually, the way we care for one another spreads like those old familiar ripples on the pond reaching out to the broader community and helping all see that we are forces for good and positive action.

So, we have much in common with those early communities of faith that struggled under persecution and misperception and that kept together. We, too, hold together in spite of differences in personality and desire. We hold together in spite of egos and strong wills. We hold together because we, at heart, hold the teachings of Jesus as precious and we seek to live them as we work through life revealing the nature of God to all we meet. It takes time and it takes patience and it takes practice, but, as we live together as a united community of faith, we will always discover new and better ways to include others and create places of hospitality in our individual lives and in this place.

-- Amen

Henri Nouwen, Reaching Out, The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life, 1975, Doubleday