

Equal Footing

Acts 10:44-48; I John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17; Psalm 98 5-21-06

One thing that members of churches that share congregational polity know, is that each and every member of their community of faith is on an equal footing with every other member. Whether you join a Congregational church today or whether you have been a lifelong member, you have the same voice and vote as everyone else concerning congregational matters. The same holds true for those who pastor a church operated in congregational manner.

We often point to Martin Luther as the one who led us into this “priesthood of all believers” concept, and he did. But, it was Jesus who set the original pattern for us even though we can be quite certain he was not thinking of our form of institutional church when he did. His concept of a community was “wherever two or more are gathered in my name, I will be there in the midst of you.” Numbers never counted, intent did.

In our reading from the Gospel of John he moves a step further toward operating from a basis of equal footing when he calls those who were with him “friends”—they were no longer “servants” but “friends.” They had attained this status through their faithfulness to Jesus and his message. They had begun to understand just what it was he was all about and what it was he tried to share with them. In fellowship with one another they had established a mutual bond, a two way street of respect and love. Now they would be the “friends” who would band together to go on beyond Jesus carrying the gospel to all corners of the earth.

We have all had times in our lives when those who have been acquaintances become friends. There is a subtle shift in a relationship. A different level of relating to a friend exists than that for acquaintances. There is more trust, more freedom of expression, more acceptance of the differences that might still exist between the two parties. If a good friend injures us, we often are able to rebound from the hurt and remain friends. We have the safety and the freedom of the bond of friendship in which to work things out. And, you know, most disagreements can be worked through if the people involved are willing to listen and process what the other has to say and then have the freedom to express their angle on the disagreement. There is much to be said for strong friendships.

Henry Ford once asked a man with whom he was having lunch, “Who is your best friend?” Before the man could answer, Ford, said, “I’ll tell you who your best friend is,” and he wrote this sentence for the other man to read: “Your best friend is the one who brings out the best that is within you.” Our best friends are those who do more than simply like us. They also believe in us. They support us, but occasionally, they nudge us as well.

Someone once said, “A friend is someone who knows you as you are, understands where you’ve been, accepts who you’ve become, and still, gently invites you to grow.” Several friends have taught me this is true over the years. No matter how we may punch each other on occasion, there is a strong bond that remains that will not let us go. A bond that puts us on equal footing. A bond that encourages us to grow.

This bond is one that Jesus said was precious. It was and is created through the willingness to be vulnerable and to love one another.

In our reading from the book of Acts, Peter had come to a startling new insight. Gentiles were as worthy as Jews to receive the Holy Spirit. Peter had a vision on a rooftop in Joppa earlier in this morning’s chapter. During this vision, or dream, a sheet in which various types of animals were riding was lowered before him three times. He was told to kill and eat the animals. Although he was very hungry he told God he would not—the animals were unclean. God asked him who he was to decide what was clean and what was unclean. God had made those things thought to be unclean, clean. Every animal in the sheet was on an equal footing.

Peter was puzzling over this vision when the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles, people considered unclean. He knew then that all were to be allowed to learn the good

news of Christ. This changed his mission. The testimony of the spirit was the truth. He realized that the message was intended for all people it was not exclusive. It sought to draw all together.

There are times in our present day world when we sense that the message of equal footing for all who believe in Christ is under a cloud or lost in the fog of doctrine and dogma. We seem far more intent on telling those of differing theological stripes that they are outside the pale of Jesus and of God. We look for all the little things that can separate us while overlooking all in life that we hold in common as near and dear to our hearts. When we are able to set aside the defenses we construct so carefully we are enabled to see that we share much more in this life than we ever thought we did. Our very human-ness binds us together in our search for completion. We have a driving need to be in the company of others of like minds and goals. To do so we sometimes need to expand our horizons.

Edwin Markham put it a little differently in his "Circle Poem:"
 He drew a circle that shut me out;
 Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout:
 But love and I had the wit to win,
 We drew a circle that took him in.

That is what our faith asks us to do—to keep enlarging our circle of love and care so that we include more and more people. We are an inclusive bunch, one that respects differences in viewpoint in the area of our faith. Most of us understand that everyone is on some sort of faith journey. Where they are on their journey is between them and their God. It is rarely in the same place we find ourselves but it is not the wrong place. When we look at another and think they are way off base we are busy drawing a circle that shuts him or her out.

And that brings us right back around to our readings for this morning. All of them encourage us to keep drawing our circles larger and granting people equal footing as we move along through life. Jesus tells us this, God prods Peter into an understanding of this and the author of the First Letter of John does also. The message is repeated over and over again. In our very best moments I believe we understand and we even practice this part of our faith. We must never give up for we all know that practice will make perfect with time and patience, so help us God. Amen