

“Willing to Yield” ~ September 20, 2009
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37, Psalm 1

Years and years and years ago, early in my ministry, I was called to serve as an associate minister in a church that was just being gathered. This church had been created by a group of people who had left their former church over some issue or another. This is not a rarity.

The new church met in an American Legion hall for about a year and a half. As the pastor in charge of Christian Education, I had the responsibilities of hauling all the supplies needed by the Sunday school back and forth to the hall, wiping the beer and other stuff off the floors so the kids wouldn't stick to them, and teaching a group of 25-30 children, aged 4-14 every Sunday with one or two teen helpers. It was a challenging and very rewarding adventure.

Fortunately, in the second year of this church's life, a small former Lutheran church, in Grafton, Wisconsin, was somehow coaxed onto the market. This small church had been used by a carpenter for a number of years. The sanctuary was his woodworking shop and the basement contained his family's living quarters. We went to check it out and liked it immediately in spite of the incredible amount of sawdust there was covering everything. Using our imaginations we could see that this was the right place for this small church to take root. So, the congregation of about 30 families bought it, for, if I remember correctly, \$90,000. The money was raised in less than a month. Then the real work began.

I have never forgotten the huge project undertaken, so many years ago, when a group of volunteers raised a scaffold and, for many days, stripped off old wall covering and painted and stained the church into readiness by Christmas. They even let me paint the trim—ugh. A local newspaper reported the story with the headline, “Congregation Opens A Gem for Christmas.”

This was far away and long ago but I remembered it as I watched Judy “the straw boss” Amato, Liz Blum, Jean Millard and Abrah Carroll quietly painting Fellowship Hall on Friday. I know Greg Millard had been there on Thursday. Judy was wise enough to refrain from offering me a brush, at that time.

Enter the scripture reading from the little Letter of James—one of my favorite little letters in the New Testament. This reading reminds us that, “those who are wise and understanding do their good work with gentleness born of wisdom.” It goes on to note that if people only do something “in the spirit of envy or selfish ambition there will be disorder and wickedness of every kind.” The author reminds us that wisdom comes with a willingness to yield, to realize that any project undertaken in any church should never be one that is all about the people doing it but about the goodness it brings about for the whole body of Christ. For there is peace sown far beyond the loyal workers—it touches everyone and the joy of working together for God permeates all we do. If there is any kind of conflict, it stems from selfish desires and motives. There can be none of that if we are truly serving God in the manner of Jesus.

Congregations that learn to work well together, through thick and thin, setting personality differences aside, are the ones that survive and flourish. If there is no hesitation for their members to willingly offer to help with projects, the great and the small, the seen and unseen, things move forward in a wonderful way.

Jesus was really talking about the same thing in our reading from the Gospel of Mark. Can we believe, that, while Jesus was trying to prepare his disciples for the future, they were squabbling with one another over who was the greatest, the most important? Can we even find a way to wrap our minds around this? For heaven's sake, the man was telling them that he was going to die and their only concern was who was the "number one" follower. This is certainly never what it is about to be a disciple of Christ. Never.

Being a true follower means that our egos are set aside. As I recall, during a Strategic Planning Session last spring, one suggestion offered for making this body of Christ stronger and more united, was that we park our egos at the door; that we manage to set ourselves aside when we enter this place. We do this out of respect for God and for Jesus, who sought to lead us into a better understanding of who we are and whose we are and why we are here. Are we here to find a quiet place where we can think and reflect on our lives and the service we have given and are willing to give in the future? Or do we appear because, well, we really should, and even though the pews are hard and even though the service might be a tad boring, and even though we come carrying our grudges against the person three pews away, or even if it is a peaceful place to focus on our grocery list, or to see if so and so is here or to count how many are not..... Are we willing to set aside all the small reasons we have come and look to the larger? "Do we want to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative? Latch on to the affirmative and don't mess with Mister-in-between?"

In our hearts we know why we should be here. We are all members of a team. This is true especially in Congregationalism. We are all on an equal footing whether we sing in the choir, play the organ, teach Sunday school, chair a committee, clean the bathrooms, dare to speak from the pulpit, work on a tag sale, bake cookies or pick up a paint brush and make an effort to make our surroundings more beautiful. We are all on an equal footing. As the old tired saying reminds us, "There is no 'I' in team."

That's what Jesus was saying to those fellows elbowing each other out of the way as they walked along behind him. He was telling them to think again. If they thought they were first, the most important, they were not. The first, those who loudly push their way to the front of the pack, will be last. While those who quietly and lovingly go about the work of God, seeking no glory or acclaim for themselves, will be first in the eyes of God.

Those who are willing to yield to the will and ways of God as shown us by Jesus are the ones who are good for the long run. Those who believe their own way is the only way because it makes them feel strong and important are those who have yet to find their way. Most often they burn out or tire out or just give out.

It is up to each and every one of us to discern how we can best serve God and, this, God's church. When we come together with a willingness to yield, to listen to one another, to implement ideas that are brought forth, to try to find the best way—not always the smoothest or our own—we will discover that the rewards are beyond all we could imagine. We will find the treasure we all are to one another and the treasure that ties us together. We will find that hearts and souls, minds and hands, lovingly given to God are the only gifts our Creator requires.

-- Amen