

October 18, 2009

Make it Simple – Acting Together

There is a very charming story, supposedly told by CBS reporter Charles Osgood, about two women who enjoyed playing the piano in the nursing home where they lived. The halls of that place often resonated with the music they played together, Ruth on one side of the bench and Margaret on the other. They complimented one another, most importantly because each had suffered the paralyzing effects of a stroke, only on opposite sides. Together their hands again roamed the entire keyboard and together they were able to do what neither of them alone could accomplish. And not only did their music flourish, but so did a loving friendship.

Somehow deep inside of us, we know that acting together is better than acting alone.

The FFA group at school has t-shirts with the motto: “When we combine forces, we multiply our chances of success”. Every organization, community, state, and nation, makes the same claim. That is why they exist in the first place. In ways large and small, humanity groups itself together for this reason: **we need one another, we need to act together**, and God calls the church to act together as well. Acting together is our theme today as we continue to think about the wise use of all the gifts and resources God has given us. We began two weeks ago with letting go of our worries, and then last week we faced the truth that God will never leave us alone even in the middle of life’s stormy seas.

Today we begin to imagine the enormous potential that awaits the world when people who are loved and redeemed by God’s grace, act together. We are not loved for nothing! We are loved for a purpose. We are loved so that we can love others in return. We are loved so that God’s love can flow through us and bring hope and healing and nourishment to the world.

We know that acting together is nothing new. Communities such as Bloomfield are well known for coming together in times of tragedy and difficulty – in times of celebration and joy. We do very well in supporting one another and doing things for the good of the community. Indeed acting together is a natural and necessary thing to do and is a survival tool used by all kinds of living systems. And that is a good thing.

But the command of Jesus is not about acting for our own survival. It is not about protecting our own. Jesus says “Love as I have loved you.” Jesus risks everything, including his own survival, for the sake of people who do not deserve his love and can never pay it back. Jesus loves the very ones who end his life by driving the nails into his flesh. How can he ask us to do that? How can he command us to “love one another as I have loved you?” It’s impossible.

And sadly, that is where the conversation often ends. We are thankful for what God has done for us but we feel incapable of ever living up to the potential God seems to have in mind for us. It is evil’s greatest weapon. We sin most often not by thinking ourselves too

big but rather by imagining ourselves too small. We shrink from any thought of greatness and so we hold back and play it safe. We do our share, we give as things are needed, and we try not to draw too much attention to ourselves. It's a nice way of *living* but it is not the *loving* that Jesus commands.

Loving as Jesus loves is not safe. It is risky and bold and brash. It is only possible because God believes that we are great and God intends for us to do great things, especially when we act together. Greatness is moving beyond the ordinarily possible. Greatness according to God is speaking for those who have no voice, giving to those who cannot repay, forgiving those who do not ask, and feeding those who cannot feed themselves.

I heard a story once about the difference between heaven and hell. In both places, people were seated at long banquet tables with a wonderful plate of food before them. In heaven the mood was festive and happy and people were enjoying their meal together. In hell the hall reverberated with angry complaints and cursing about the horrible situation they found themselves in. You see every person in hell had a cast on their arms from their shoulder to their wrist and had no way of eating the food in front of them. They couldn't imagine how God could punish them for all eternity like this.

But up in heaven the people had the exact same casts on their arms and yet they were still able to enjoy the food in front of them. The difference was that in heaven, people did not feed themselves but instead fed the one across them at the table.

God calls us to act together in great ways. God empowers us to risk loving unconditionally because God has promised to never leave us alone. By trusting in this promise, we dare to leave behind the safety of our own carefully constructed world and boldly act together to speak God's love in both word and deed. In the process, we encounter the living Christ and suddenly the impossible becomes possible.

Today, we join with churches all around the world in confronting the challenge of hunger in the world. It is ironic that this day fell on the same day that we are going to have a wonderful meal together after worship. But perhaps this is the perfect day to consider again what it means to love as Jesus loves us. "Bread For the World" is an organization that has been loving the world in the way of Jesus for 35 years and in conjunction with churches such as the ELCA, it has fed thousands upon thousands of hungry people and has advocated for policies and programs that help end the scourge of hunger in a world of plenty.

Feeding the world's poorest people is one of the things we do when we "act together" but there is still plenty more "acting" to do. It is estimated that nearly 800 million people suffer from lack of adequate food. That's more than double the population of the entire United States! And yet, what would that number be if only a few more people, a few more congregations, a few more churches were willing to risk loving and giving in the same way as God has given to us? What kind of possibilities await us, in this place, as we more and more comprehend how much God loves us? What kind of claim does that love place on our lives and how will we be moved to act together and love others in bold new ways? I can think of no greater question before us and no greater force to change us.