

Institution and Community

From the series: Religion and the Human Story

Psalm 84; Ephesians 3:14-21

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Religion is a constant and human experience. It has always been every place and every time. People have been religious because religion is that response to the mystery that encounters us in the midst of our lives when we face those ultimate questions, when we wonder about that from which we have issued and what the issue of our lives will be. Someone has a vision, someone has an illumination, the story of it is told and it finds resonance in other minds and hearts; a community forms, and the community formed begins to live in that story, that fresh experience. Then the community, living in that story, begins eventually, gradually to move away from the fresh blush of the experience and thus it is necessary, in order to introduce others to the community and to the experience, to tell the story. But gradually it is necessary, as well, to find ways to order that community in its life. And then the order and the structures, that are put in place in order to allow the community to continue, take on greater importance, and eventually that fresh blush of experience is over and there is no one around anymore that remembers that experience or had entered into its vitality and its joy. Then it becomes a matter of telling the story and reliving the story.

But now, increasingly, those forms and structures by which the community is shaped take on greater importance and then, at some time or other, those forms and structures become, as it were, an end in themselves and those who were charged with the responsibility for the institution seek to preserve it and to perpetuate it and seek its stability and its solidity and more and more energy, time and resource is put into the buoying up of the forms and the structures. Gradually, the initial experience that gave it its birth is forgotten or becomes only a distant memory and that which called that community into being in the first place is no longer the primary center of its life and its vision.

Do you follow me? Isn't that what happens? It is natural. That is just plain what happens. It is kind of an inevitability, because experience finally needs to be somehow or other structured and, in order to be passed on, needs to have those

kinds of institutional forms that are somewhat objective and tangible. So, eventually, that which was the first blush of experience is moved to second place in favor of the institutional forms that keep it going. But it has often been lost and the spirit bound. That is just the way it is.

Spirit without form fades. Form is necessary if spirit would be passed on. But, the moment the spirit takes form, the seeds of death are in the movement. That is just the way it is.

Today this community has to attend to its forms and its structures. Thank God for us the institutional forms are minimal and the amount of time and energy we give to it is minimal, but we have to do that, and we are going to do that today. So, I thought it might be a good thing for us for a few moments to think about institution and community and the relationship and the tensions.

This community was born in a burst of grace and joy and renewal in the 70s. It simply exploded. The growth went off the charts. There was a marvelous spirit of freedom and flexibility, and although we had inherited old forms, we had a whole new life and there has always been here a marvelous relationship of trust between the pastors and the people, so that the people entrusted us simply to flow with the spirit and to move, to catch the wave. What happened was that we had a marvelous experience together, but we were working around our structures rather than through our structures. We had inherited a form of governance that came out of the 17th century and, when I began to address that issue with this congregation, it was the only time I addressed something in which there was real hesitancy to go along with the truth. I think there was a bit of hesitancy to change those old governmental structures because, after all, they had been around for a long time and, if I got too far out of line, they could always call those old structures back into function.

Eventually, after 20 years, we changed our form of government. We went from the historic Consistory made up of Elders and Deacons, the structure which was still in place but was being worked around rather than through, to a form of government that reflected two basic concerns that I had, or two insights that I had. One was that a community like this has a ministry function and a management function and, in the old structure, the same people had to do both. Few people are gifted in both areas, and so one gifted in prayer yawned while we talked about the people, and ones who talked about putting on a new roof yawned while others talked about prayer. Out of the new structure, finally, we have a council for management and a council for ministry. This past Monday night I was able to go to both. They don't usually fall on the same night, but in the Operations Council we were putting the final touches on the budget. Then I went to the Ministry Council where we were talking about people and program and all that kind of thing, and it was a paradigm, a model for me of the kind of

structure that we have now where there are people who are gifted in one area, who are using their best gifts and strengths in that area for the church, and people with other gifts in the other area working at the point of their strength, as well.

I knew one other thing. Historically there are people who are all excited about the life of the congregation and, where there is a Board of Trustees, they are usually crusty, old, sort of elitist, well-heeled people. You could trace this back in the history of the church. The people who are all excited about doing things and make these proposals come up against the Board of Trustees and, boom, it is dead. I didn't want that to happen. So, my suggestion was that from ministry and management, from both councils, there come two people each to meet in the Board of Trustees, along with two people at large that you choose, so that the Board of Trustees would be a place where ministry and management would clash and collide and collude and work together, and you would have the final say about those at large people, one of whom would chair that Board of Trustees. I mention that because not many of you have the foggiest idea of how we operate in our structures here. You don't care. I hope you never really investigate too thoroughly. That is the way it works and it is really a wonderful, efficient and effective form of governance for a community such as this. It works.

Today when we attend to that minimal structure of institution, I want to call you to the valuing and the awareness and the continual commitment to community, because forms and structures are necessary, but it is community that is far more important. I want you to be reminded that we are a community because there is something that has called us together and it is that which has called us together that creates the uniqueness of our life, and that which has called us together is that which we must nurture and must always cherish. The institutional forms can come and go, but that which is at the heart of our life - those are the things of which we must be aware and attentive in order that we can keep that blush alive and fresh.

We are a people who have been marked by grace and that is not just a theological word. That means that we are a people who concretely open our arms to everyone and exclude no one. It is the concrete experience of being accepted in the name of God by the grace of Jesus Christ into this community. Whomever you are, from wherever you come, whatever your history, you are welcome here. It says that rather eloquently on the back of our liturgy and we print it every week. People who read it for the first time continue to say, "That's good!" We are a community which has not been content simply to reiterate old creeds and follow old ways. We have been a community with intellectual curiosity that has probed the faith, that has tried to come to an understanding through the use of critical rationality. We have used our minds and our reason

in order to probe the history and the development of the tradition so that what we confess and what we believe and that which shapes our lives is that which we can authentically own as our own. And we are a community that has been marked by care, by compassion, by genuine community, the arms of grace and love. That is what has drawn us together, and that is what has made our life what it is.

A rather astute young man said to me not so long ago, "Dick, I really like what you do, but aren't you working yourself out of a job?" I said, "Yes and no. If you mean am I working myself out of a job if my job consists of leading a congregation that claims to hold absolute truths, that claims to possess the keys to the kingdom of heaven, that has an authoritarian rule over which people's lives are proscribed, or if you mean because Christ Community is the opposite of all those things that I am out of a job, then you are right, because we have given up here the claim to absolute truth. We have given up here that claim to authoritarian rule. We have given up here that kind of institutional dogmatism which has been so much a part of the traditional church scene."

I said to him, "No, I haven't worked myself out of a job if you mean community, if you mean creating a place and a space where the spiritual life can be lived, where questions can be asked, where people can come together because we are social animals, after all, where people can come together for mutual support, mutual encouragement, for the enhancement of our respective lives. If you mean creating a place where children can be baptized and nurtured and where we can care for those who are in need and bury those whom we have loved and lost a while, if you mean community in that sense, then no, I haven't worked myself out of a job at all."

The sociologist Peter Berger who has a great deal of interest in social organization and is a committed Christian, as well, has written about the nature of the church as institution, and he speaks of the weak church and the strong church, and he questions whether a church, a community, based like ours is strong enough foundation to build upon. In a very interesting discussion he suggests that, quoting from the book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* by Dean Kelly, Kelly was right in the sense that those churches that demand adherence to absolute truths, those churches that demand a very strict discipline, those churches that seek to be zealous in their evangelism and their missionary endeavor, those churches grow. But, I want you to know that what we have become is a very self-conscious endeavor, for that book by Kelly was written in 1972 and I got hold of it and I brought that book into the pulpit around that time and said if this guy is right, we are doomed because we are doing everything wrong. Rather than the claim of absolute truth, rather than trying to harness you and to proscribe your behavior, rather than putting all of that heavy, traditional obligation upon you, we were setting people free and

throwing off the shackles. I said if Kelly's right, we cannot possibly live because we are not building on that which has traditionally been a strong foundation for an institution. And Kelly was right in the sense that there will always be those who want dogmatism, who want absolutism, who want authoritarianism. It is easier, it is simpler, you don't have to think about it, you can go and be a sheep. There are always going to be those whose emotional needs demand that kind of structure.

But, I was convinced then and I am convinced now that there will always be a minority of people for whom that won't work. While Kelly was right in the sense that those kinds of churches have continued to prosper, he was not right in the fact that those who did not go that way simply had people drop off, so that, as Bishop Spong says, there are millions and millions of people out there who are believers in exile. They have given up on the institution. They cannot go that route; they won't go that route, and yet they still have the same spiritual need, the same quest, the same questioning.

I would suggest to you that it has been the unique nature of this community that we have been not for the majority and not for the masses, but for a phrase I have used here for years, simply for a narrow niche, that narrow niche of people who refuse to give up on living before the face of God and opening their lives before the mystery of being, but, who need to think about it, who need to probe it, who need to have an authentic grasp of what it is they are doing, an awareness of why. That which has brought us together in the beginning was that thoughtful questioning, that intellectual inquiry that was wedded to a passionate offer of grace that issued in a compassionate community

Jack Miles, a very interesting and provocative writer who has written *God, a Biography*, and a book on Christ, talked in a *New York Times* magazine some years ago of that resurgence of religion and he talked about the fact that that God question does not go away. But, then he said something very interesting that caught my eye. He said, "And there are very few that have the patience or the preparation to probe theologically to find the viability of an honest religious life today. But their importance is disproportionate to their number."

I said, "Ah, yes, just a few who will continue to think and continue to trust and continue to love in order to make the viability of the practice of religion honest and authentic with a mind that is critically aware but with a heart that longs for God." *I believe with all my heart that the heart cannot long dwell where the mind cannot follow.*

And so, we have to attend to some things this morning, but that is minimal. What has called us together and what creates a community, that is all-

important. It is that of which we must be aware. It is that to which we must continue to attend. It is that that is our strength.

Peter Berger acknowledged the fact that those who are a part of a community like this recognize that they have chosen to be there. You don't have to be there. And you won't be damned if you leave. Those who are a part of a community like this are aware of the fact that they are part of a voluntary association, and if you voluntarily come, you may voluntarily leave, and God bless. But, in the meantime, that which binds us together is that passionate quest for the eternal God, that mystery that embraces our lives finally it is community.

Paul got all choked up about it at the church at Ephesus. He said "My prayer for you is that you be rooted and grounded in love, and you will come to know the height and depth and length and breadth of the love of God in Christ Jesus," because community is about love. We don't turn off our minds. We ask every question. We probe the edges. But, we know finally it is in that gracious relationship of inclusivity that embraces all where we live together in love and we know that that is the environment, that is the ambience of grace which enables us to pursue together and individually that quest which is endemic to being human. Paul says that you would know that love, and then he is lost in wonder, love and praise as he breaks out in doxology, "To the one who is able to do far beyond anything we have yet imagined or ever dreamed of to God be the glory in the church in Christ Jesus."

Paul just soared as he thought about it, and so do I. I believe so deeply in what we are. I believe so deeply in the heart of this community. I look at this family; I have been with them, baptized their children, married their children, buried their loved ones over so many years. Where would you go if you didn't have a loving community in which to celebrate those holy moments of life?

I sat with Barbara and Norman on Wednesday as Norman Timmer came alive telling me a story, saying, "You changed my life." I said, "Norm, I didn't change your life. I was just the voice that articulated what you deeply believed." Barbara told me that when I left, he relaxed and the head nurse came in and noticed the change, and he died.

And so, I come today and I hear Molly sing, "Whatever your situation, I will be your home, and when I move my hand, I will bring you home," and I cried, because that is what it is all about.