

Keep Caring – It Matters

Text: Jeremiah 22:15-16; James 1:27; Matthew 25:40

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The fact that we seek to raise the financial support for this community, this ministry, in a party format speaks volumes. The idea arose some years ago. There was a task force gathered because this ministry needed a hitch in its level of support. The problem with this ministry is that it has always looked prosperous, and I think I can also say, at least on the part of all those who have surrounded me, it has been done with excellence. But, the appearance deceives, because we have, as long as I have been here, been hanging by a very thin thread. The problem is that this has become a rather substantial institution with a large program and a vision and it is led by one who does not effectively raise money. I am not saying that to put myself down or to be humble over much. I simply recognize that fact because I have colleagues in the ministry who, frankly, I think have less gifts than I do in many respects, and yet they raise much more money. And so, this congregation has struggled, contrary to appearances.

When that task force gathered, a party was mentioned and I jumped on it immediately and said, “Now, I think that I could do. I could use a party format to raise the financial backing for the ministry.” Thus it was born - Party Sunday.

I remember the first one very well - the balloons which we've already enjoyed. I love balloons, personally. I just think it's such a marvelous moment, and I think the thing I love about it most is the fact that there is such joy all over. But, after that first Party Sunday with balloons and all of the fun, children went to their respective schools and it came back to us from here and there, from the schools around the community, that the children went and told in their classes that they actually had had fun in church, and I thought that was very healthy and I still think it's a very, very good thing, because, as Ron said, I was also raised with the fact where the most significant signal in church was "Shhhhh" and it was rather sober and rather somber. So, I love the party, and the fact that we do it on this critical Sunday in which we call for your commitment speaks volumes about the nature of this community.

For one thing, it keeps things in perspective. I have listened enough, long enough, to appeals for funds for Christian causes which come off as though God is holding

God's breath as though if this doesn't happen, if this response isn't given, something critical will happen or something critical won't happen, and I want to say that a party format for fund-raising gives us a good perspective.

You know, we're part of something really big. I mean the human drama. I mean the cosmic drama. I mean billions of years, dimensions of space that the human mind can't even take in, all of the wonder of this emerging, evolutionary, cosmic process of which we're a part, being just lately able as human beings with self-consciousness to reflect on it and to begin to understand it. What a big thing this is! There's a Creator Spirit in the midst of it, permeating it in all of its dimensions and moving it forward, and it will go forward, with us, or in spite of us. I think taking the ministry and its financial support into a party format keeps the perspective alive that we are, after all, just human.

The word human comes from a root *humus*, and *humus* is that stuff after a rain when the worms have come up and they leave little deposits. That's humus. And to be human is to be made of stuff like that. We are, finally, humus. Another word from the same root is humor, of course, and God's saving gift is a sense of humor. If we could keep in mind what we really are, if we could remember being human, that we are simply humus, then we can keep our sense of humor about ourselves. I always like to say that what I do I take very seriously, but I take myself with a grain of salt, and I think that's a rather healthy perspective to keep in church, also, because there is often such a tension created and the emotions can be stirred, and a manipulative kind of dimension easily comes along with a rather coercive spirit. No, we're going to talk about this ministry and its financial support and we're going to ask you to commit, and we're going to do it in a party format to keep our perspective.

But, the party format also enables us just to do what we're doing this morning - to celebrate and to be community together. You know, that isn't very often possible for us. When I was growing up, and I'm sure many of you would say the same thing, my whole social life, the life of my family centered in the church. Every weekend was shot to heaven and several points throughout the week, as well. My family didn't do anything that wasn't connected with the church or with people of the church, and you know there was something rather wonderful about that. It was very stable; it was very solid; it was very secure and there was a lot of mutual support. Everybody knew everybody. That was wonderful. Everybody knew everything about everybody. That wasn't so wonderful. But, it was a close-knit community that was there for generations, generally, with deep roots. People didn't move around so much, and so the community was together in all kinds of situations. Not so anymore. Just look at you - a diverse group of people from diverse walks of life, from diverse backgrounds, from many areas, coming together in this highly mobile society, finding here something that draws you here. But, how do you know that we are community together unless we can punch some balloons in the air together, laugh together, enjoy one another, and let our hair down and acknowledge the fact that we are family. We belong together. I

think it's a very healthy way to celebrate the fact of community. If I call a big party on Wednesday night, you wouldn't show up. You are too busy. In fact, we jam as much as we can into Sunday morning. We're pretty lucky to get a lot of you here occasionally on a Sunday morning. Now, that's not a criticism. It's just an acknowledgment of the very nature of our society and of our lives. So, if we don't do it now, we'll probably never do it. I think it's very healthy to do it.

I like the fact that children can go away and say we had fun in church this morning, and I hope some of you saw someone else for the first time laughing, having a good time. It builds community, which is, after all, very important. The thing we're here about this morning is to raise the same question I asked last year - what is it worth to have this kind of community? The secret will be whether or not there is enough value in this community to give it sufficient support to continue and to grow. This is about the enabling of this ministry that we have found something in that has drawn us together.

I want to suggest that we must be very clear about the nature of this community, because it's an alternative community, and I want to give you two words. It's a thinking community and it's a caring community. Now, it's a lot more things, but at least just focus on those two for a moment this morning. It's a thinking community and it's a caring community, and it may seem at first blush that thinking and caring don't have a lot to do with each other. I want to destroy that myth. I'd like to establish in your minds this morning that we are a thinking community in order that we might be a caring community with authenticity.

I have mentioned in various settings from time to time the fact that on Tuesdays I have lunch at Duba's with three colleagues who are of diverse theological posture. It's a fantastic conversation; it's a very stimulating couple of hours. Recently a friend of mine was invited to join for two or three weeks, and he didn't understand that, if one of the original four is not there and a statement is made about one of them, that statement will come out in the conversation, so my friend who was a guest there, before I arrived, said, "Dick's tired."

When I sat down, before very long, Duncan Littlefair looked at me and said, "Dick, are you tired?" (Maybe he said, "Are you tired of what you're doing?")

There was kind of a hush, and I said, "Yes." I don't think it's the answer that they expected to hear. I said, "Yes, I'm tired. I'm tired of what I'm doing." And then I went on to explain.

I'm not tired of being a pastor. I'm not tired of thinking the faith. I'm not tired of preaching. But, I'm tired of being a voice in the wilderness. I'm tired of swimming against the tide. I'm tired of caring deeply about things that so few people care about. I'm tired of being obsessed with a vision and a perspective that doesn't seem very important to very many people, and I went on to speak about that a little bit.

My friend who had made the statement said, "Well, you are a pastor at heart."

I said, "Yes, my deepest identity is as a pastor."

"But," he said, "When you preach, you're not a pastor. You're not being pastoral."

I said, "When I preach, I am being pastoral, because when I preach, it's the consequence of thinking the faith, and I think the faith in order that I may be a pastor."

All of my years, I have been thinking about the faith, not in order to have some answers about the faith or to be able to find God. I have been thinking about the faith in order to stand at the deathbed of one who looks me in the eye and I've been thinking in order that in that moment I might be honest and authentic, that I might be present to that person in their dying hour. I told them, "I can tell you about a crib death 25 years ago; I can tell you about a lovely young child that died of leukemia; I can tell you about a young mother who had three miscarriages, was pregnant once again, for five months everything looked beautiful, something went wrong, something bizarre, all five months. Because of the three miscarriages, she had prayed, 'Dear God, Dear God, make it right,' and then it wasn't right, and then what do you say to a young woman like that?"

"I think the faith in order that I might speak to people in their deepest needs and their most existential moments. I think the faith, not in order that I can have answers, but in order that I know when I don't have answers."

Henri Nouwen, years ago, wrote a little meditation in which he talked about care, and he talked about the fact that no one wants to care. Everyone wants to cure. What we do is let pious clichés trip off our lips rather than being present to people in their pain and in their darkness, and he went back to the origin of the word *care*, the English word, in the Gothic, *Kara*, which means to lament, to grieve with, to cry out with, and he pointed out the degeneration of that word care. The word care has become a sign of indifference.

"Do you want to go to a movie?"

"I don't care."

"Do you want to do this?"

"I don't care."

"Do you want to go there?"

"I don't care."

The nonchalance, the indifference that doesn't want to get involved, doesn't want to make a decision, doesn't want to make a commitment. But, Nouwen said, to

care is to be present with, to lament with, to grieve with, to be at the side of, because the human situation is not all parties and it's not all sweetness and light. It is marked by suffering and it is marked by tragedy, and at its best, religion is caring.

Jeremiah excoriated the king for building his palace when the poor were suffering. He reminded the king of his forebears, saying they took up the cause of justice and righteousness; they were concerned for the cause of the poor. Then it was well with them. "Is not this to know me?" says the Lord.

Have you every heard knowing the Lord defined that way? Knowing the Lord. Know the Lord. Do you know the Lord? That is such a superficial, facile kind of expression - knowing the Lord is being concerned for the downtrodden and the poor and the marginalized and the excluded, and I believe that James was in line with that Hebrew prophetic tradition.

Some say that James was fighting Paul. I don't know whether he was fighting Paul or not. Paul was a grace junky. Dick Rhem has been a grace junky. Ron Zoet comes to this church and the first time he hears a sermon it concludes with "All is grace," and he could have come to any one of five hundred other Sundays and I would have said the same thing, because, like Martin Luther, I have experienced the grace of God that is liberating and is freeing. Grace is my theme.

Martin Luther didn't like James. Neither do I like James. Luther called James an epistle of straw, and he didn't want to hear about the law and he didn't want to hear about obedience, and I recognized this week, thinking about this whole thing, that James is a lot closer to Jeremiah and Jesus than Paul was. I don't think James was fighting Paul. I think he was probably fighting a misconstruction of Paul. You can misconstrue Paul's grace and make it a salvation cult. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." Cheap grace. Mere affirmation.

James says it's not enough. James says, "Be doers of the word and not hearers only." James says you show me your faith without works, I'll show you my faith by my works.

Paul said, "Of course, we're saved by grace through faith without any works." James says that's not right. Paul was speaking about one situation, James another.

I don't think James was countering Paul, but I think he was complementing Paul, and what he was saying, I realize today, was closer to the gospel of Jesus Christ than the gospel of Paul. Jesus said, "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me."

James says true religion is about taking care of widows and orphans, and you can translate widows and orphans into the context of today. Who are the

marginalized? Who are the abused and the oppressed? True religion is about caring for them.

Thinking and caring, and thinking in order to care authentically. Thinking in order to care with authenticity, integrity, and honesty. I don't think in order to find an answer. I think in the face of situations that have no answer so that I have thought profoundly in order to care deeply and honestly. Nouwen says we would like to cure. We don't care. To care is not to cure, it's to be present in the darkness, to stand there and absorb the pain without an answer, because what we all really need is that human community that assures us when we have no answer that we're not alone.

This community thinks, not in order to find answers, but in order to care honestly. Keep caring, people. It matters.