

Here I Stand

Sunday Evening Gathering
Spring Lake Country Club

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September 24, 2006

Well, that's a little dramatic, I suppose. It comes from Martin Luther as he stood before the Diet of Worms giving an account of his faith. This is not such a history-shaping moment and where I stand is of little interest beyond the narrow confines of Christ Community. Yet we have shared a wonderful experience of faith community and beautiful worship: intelligent, aesthetically uplifting and inspirational, all marked by excellence. And now for many there is an absence of that experience and a void in the soul.

I share that experience, or lack of experience.

We are still part of the community; we still support it financially. We still hope for it a good and strong future.

Yet, Nancy and I must acknowledge that we feel estranged and sense ourselves more at home with the community in exile--the Diaspora.

That being the case I feel it important and necessary to be clear about my engagement or lack of it since Thanksgiving, 2005.

Let me say that I wondered if I should be here tonight. I was happy to do the three summer Sunday evenings. When asked, I was assured this was an opportunity for good friends with much shared history to meet, an opportunity since those envisioned were those who had dropped out of regular worship attendance and missed the experience of community.

Those evenings arose quite spontaneously and were not the result of some strategy session by a committee looking for an alternative to CCC. Was it naive to think such gatherings would not make the sense of loss felt more deeply? Perhaps. Were those gatherings created purposefully to create such a sense and a yearning? Simply, no; there was no ulterior motive I know in my mind and I do not believe in the minds of the initiators either. In any case, the gatherings generated a desire and request for more monthly gatherings and, now, with this difference:

Now beyond the original purpose of social gathering, it was announced that the community itself would discuss where it was in relation to CCC.

A clear demarcation was made between the three summer gatherings and this evening's gathering and those to follow. That's why I questioned whether I should be here; to gather with you where no CCC talk was allowed was one thing; to be here where you are beginning to ask, "Where are we? What is our future?" is another. I decided to be here and to speak because I decided it was important for me to set the record straight since inevitably all sorts of rumors abound. I am willing to be judged for all for which I am responsible but I want for those who care for me and trust me to hear from me where I have been and where I am. Hence my title: "Here I Stand."

I have a further motivation—a pastoral concern for you here and for the whole community. But I will come to that shortly; first my story.

The Crisis

As I turned over the reins, I don't think anyone would deny I had given Ian a "running start." The retirement celebration was marvelous. The timing was right. I was ready and delighted to retire and to let go. And I did. And for 18 months I was present and supportive of Ian's ministry.

In the Fall of 2005 I realized I was sensing a growing concern about the direction CCC was moving. I had early on suggested to Ian that people don't get out of bed to hear what they can hear at Rotary even though I granted he was dealing with important issues, was well prepared and obviously gifted. But increasingly I missed the liturgy, the "cathedral worship" and the experience of being 'moved' on Sunday morning. And I was concerned at the numbers that were no longer present.

My concern was not really theological but the so-called Progressive label I felt was not so much Progressive Christianity as Progressive Religion in General for which the biblical tradition was almost incidental.

It was not my place to voice complaint. I still claimed, "All he has to do is make it," but I knew I was not spiritually fulfilled or satisfied on Sunday morning. But then I was put on the spot: Ian emailed me—the first communication in quite some time—asking if I would add a paragraph to the stewardship letter or, at least, co-sign it.

I must tell you that put me in a real conflict situation. I wrestled and wrestled with that request. At a lunch with Cindy Anderson, Board Chair, about another matter, I told her of the request and that I couldn't do it. I had written out why and gave that to her and she said she would tell Ian, although I emailed the same response to him. With integrity I could not ask you to support what I increasingly found troubling and this for a long-held conviction that the people have two votes on community direction: their presence; their financial support. We lived that way for years. We were "Team Driven," supported by competent lay leadership, but I always knew finally the people ruled. Here is the email I sent:

cccgrace@charter.net

Subject: RAR Reflections

Date: November 30, 2005 10:44:38 PM EST

Reflections of One Retired but Caring Still....

I was quite certain they were wrong who claimed I could never “let go;” I have.

I found it not difficult. A marvelous retirement celebration, the excitement of the community for a fresh, new beginning, and the freedom from the daily/weekly pressure all added up to what I think was a graceful passing of the baton. I made clear that I would do what was asked of me but initiate nothing. I have lived up to that.

When there emerged an uprising in the spring I did my best to support the leadership in any way I could. Beginning as Ian did in a presidential election year in a destructively polarized nation, I supported the prophetic note that sounded from the pulpit. On the one occasion I was asked by Ian to express my sense of how things were going, I pointed out my concern about the Sunday morning experience. In a nutshell, I affirmed Ian for dealing with significant subjects, displaying serious preparation and intelligent treatment. My one concern expressed was the lack of an experience of awe and wonder in the presence of Mystery—the elevation of spirit, the experience of being “moved.” My word to Ian was that people will not get up on Sunday morning to hear an interesting lecture that they might hear Friday noon at Rotary. I put it that way in order to attempt to indicate what I felt was lacking.

As the weeks and months passed, it was evident that while many CCC members were absenting themselves, there was a new energy and many new faces. My “mantra” to those who were critical was “all he has to do is make it work.” I knew what I missed reflected the person I have become and that which was so central to my being—a love of high Worship, the traditional Liturgy re-interpreted/translated, received again with a second naiveté, able to touch the depths of my soul, along with an aesthetic elevation of my spirit in the seamless, carefully crafted liturgy of Word and Sacrament laced with the finest artistic expression. What my being loves and longs for is perhaps a fading appreciation. I remained unapologetic in my manner of apprehending and being apprehended by the Sacred Mystery, but I was aware that I had had my day. If the current format could bring new growth and vitality to the community and meet the needs of the rising generation, I would affirm that as the way into the future—“all he has to do is make it work.”

The fall Courier raised concerns of a deeper dimension for me. The “Turning Eastward” raised questions. Pluralism has long been taken for granted at CCC. The study of World Religions in the Perspective Hour has occurred for several years. However, the importation of elements into our corporate worship—I still use that word intentionally—did not feel to me authentic nor did I think it enhancing of the corporate experience.

My concern deepened when in September I received a call from a person I deeply respect whom I knew to be enthusiastic in the early stages of transition and whose spirit is positive and caring. She asked if I would read a piece she had written in an attempt to articulate what she was feeling about where our community was heading. I did so. I could not deny that her analysis was precisely my own. Subsequently I read a few other similar expressions that came to me. I could no longer deny that what a few thoughtful and supportive folk were saying was what I too had come to feel.

Let me be clear—I am part of this community and want to remain such. This is our spiritual home, our “family.” Our pledge for 2006 is turned in. We desire the continuing well-being and prosperity of the community. I do think, however, that the voices of serious people of good heart need to be heard.

I, perhaps as much as anyone, can identify with Ian in the leadership role. He must lead. He must lead out of his center, where his vision burns and his passion flows. I do not want him to trim his sails or be untrue to himself. That being said, the respective Governance Boards are responsible not only to him and the Team but to the People. It is here that I see our greatest challenge: Can the present direction of the current leadership succeed in bringing the community to a new future?

During the years of my leadership we operated with a Team-Driven ministry, the respective Governance Groups affirming, supporting, critiquing. There has not been for a long time essential congregational involvement beyond the governance groups and thankfully, very little congregational discord. To those who suggested we “greased the skids” and ran freely I always replied, “The people are in charge—they vote with their feet and their dollars.” If the people are present and are paying for the ministry, then we are doing something right.

I hold by that position.

These reflections arise because I have been asked by Ian to sign with him or add a paragraph to a fund-raising letter. I have anguished about how to respond. I have concluded that to sign would be to endorse a course and a future I cannot with integrity endorse.

I remain. I desire the well being of the community. I remain thankful for the place open to all—a true alternative to church as usual. I want CCC's best/ I want Ian's best.

And I want—apart from my involvement – to let the 2005 giving and the 2006 pledging tell us how we are doing and what is required of us.

RAR
11/30/05

Soon after that decision it seemed the CCC situation was less than healthy in finance, team, and community. Perhaps I stepped over the line at that point but I communicated my deep concern to the then Board Chair, Cindy Anderson, and the day before I left for Florida, to the Chair-elect, Ron Zoet.

Was I out of place? Perhaps.
Why did I do it?

It was my sense that it was time to acknowledge that the community was in trouble and perhaps time to face that honestly with Ian, trying to determine a gracious way to deal with what I thought was the reality of our situation. No need for anger or hostility—just an honest conversation.

I had stepped over the line. My intention was positive for all involved but the consequence of that communication was that, upon my return from Florida, I was confronted with the charge that it was widely perceived that I was not supportive of Ian's ministry. A half dozen close friends knew that, but beyond the present and future Board chairs—no one else knew that from me.

The charge was made by Ian in the presence of Jack Spong who had been thoroughly apprised of the situation and, with his long experience as a Bishop, had concluded the problem was that the old guy couldn't let go. This was grossly unfair. He did say in the middle of the lunch, "How does it feel to be mousetrapped?" He sensed something but never asked why I felt as I did—and I had acknowledged to Ian that it was true—I could not be supportive of his ministry.

Ian wanted to continue the conversation that week. I resisted. Finally I agreed to sit with him but only with another present, my trusted friend Peter Hart. Ian was not sure of that but eventually agreed and brought the Board Chair, Ron Zoet.

That was my moment of truth. Ian asked if I would be involved in some education. I declined, saying if I had continued to be involved, perhaps I could,

but now, with the hiatus of almost a year of any significant involvement and with the current direction, I did not feel I could. And then I tried to be clear with Ian.

In summary, I said, “Ian, I think you will make it. I wish you well. I will do nothing to undercut you. And when you succeed, it will not be the future I had hoped for, but that doesn’t matter. There will be a new CCC and that is the future.”

I then added this footnote: I said, “I have so many friends in this community. To this point I have been so careful but now I must tell you I will be honest with my friends. I can no longer act contrary to my own inner being.”

We parted on positive terms, understanding each other—simply on different wavelengths. But I assured him that I was content with a future I did not desire if he could effect that. That was not my business—I wished him well. But, in being honest with him, I felt I gained my freedom to be true to myself.

Jack Spong had suggested I had to get in or get out. I chose the latter and have distanced myself from the community over these past six months, although, as I indicated above, we continue our financial support and remain a part of CCC. And, I repeat again as I said above, my first choice would be for CCC to have a strong, vibrant future with us or without us. When that future is secure, we can choose to be a part of it or not. But until that future is determined and secure, I would hope the whole community, those currently engaged and those considered the Diaspora, might with civility and mutual respect examine what options there are for CCC going forward.

As we are aware, this evening is different from the summer series because we will intentionally take up the question of future options. And to the summer series folk who requested that these monthly gatherings continue, there is added a group of people who quite independently have been probing the question of the future for themselves and others who were like-minded.

Let me underscore the fact that this emerging group arose totally independent of the Summer Gathering initiative and prior to the first gathering on July 9. As must be obvious, the future of CCC was on the minds of many.

For the summer gathering initiative, the driving motivation was community—being with good friends. For the emerging group, the driving motivation was a sense of the absence of experience of transcendence, the experience of being in the presence of the Mystery that embraces us and inspires us.

This evening those concerns converge with the Key Question—Can there yet be a return to one community even if there were sub-communities meeting different needs and desires. This is a question for the whole community to take up—not one initiated or led by former team members.

Here I stand; I've done my best to give an account of myself over the past ten months. But I have one more concern to share and that is a pastoral concern. It has to do with the spirit in which we seek our future. We have been marked by Grace over all these years and I would hope, however the future unfolds, Grace would prevail all around.

In our religious formation and our spiritual commitments, powerful emotions are engaged and deeply felt. And we are all vulnerable to feelings of anger when the religious core of our being is touched. Friendships are strained, alienation is common and we fail to act out of our best selves according to our highest values. We are all in jeopardy at this time. And so, while my "Here I Stand" was an effort to set the record straight, my most important message this evening has to do with the care of our souls and concern for the spiritual well-being of those who constitute the present CCC ongoing.

There is anger about and probably all around—in those who resent those who have left and in those who saw no alternative to leaving. That reality reminded me of a dialogue between God and the runaway prophet Jonah. The Hebrew Scripture book of Jonah is unlike the great books of the Hebrew prophets in that it is a parable or a folk tale rather than a concrete address to a historical situation.

The story is familiar—God calls Jonah to preach to the foreign city of Nineveh and instead Jonah goes in the opposite direction. He doesn't want Nineveh to repent and be spared God's wrath. As Jonah is sailing in the opposite direction, God sends a storm and finally Jonah acknowledges he is the cause of the storm. He is thrown overboard, the storm ceases and Jonah finds himself in a whale of a belly—or is it the belly of a whale! Jonah repents, is spewed forth on land and makes his way to Nineveh, preaches repentance and the Ninevites heed the prophet, repent, and God mercifully spares them.

What fascinates me about the story is the dialogue between God and Jonah at this point. Jonah is angry because God spared Nineveh, indeed, so angry he says "God, take my life." And then that wonderful question: God asks,

Is it right for you to be angry?

At that point Jonah goes out of the city and makes a booth for himself and sat in its shade to see what would happen to the city. But God was not through; God caused a large plant to grow and give shade to Jonah to save him from discomfort. Jonah was happy. Then God caused a worm to attack the plant and it withered. The sun rose and God caused a sultry east wind to blow and the sun beat down on Jonah and again he asked to die.

And then again the question—Is it right for you to be angry about the bush?

And Jonah said, “Yes, angry enough to die!” To which God points out Jonah’s concern for the bush pales before God’s concern for the people of Nineveh.

I retell that ancient tale because of the question “Do you do well to be angry?” What the writing is really about is Jonah’s “mode of being.” God doesn’t argue with Jonah, nor does he condemn the anger or deny its presence. Rather, Jonah is asked to become aware of his own spirit and attitude. One commentator uses an interesting translation of anger—“a burning of the nostrils”—anger is a burning and while it is a common human emotion, left unattended it burns within and is destructive of the human spirit.

I won’t linger here but simply suggest to all of us in many and various situations when we feel a burning within, we remember the question—Is it well or good to be angry?

Why are we angry?

What is the source of our anger in our own being?

What does my anger say about me?

The other passage that came to me is from the New Testament—Ephesians 4. The 26th verse counsels:

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.

Again the reality of anger is recognized. The counsel is: own it, be aware of it and let it go.

The previous statement is *apropos* to our situation:

So then putting away falsehood, let us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

and verse 32 offers a beautiful appeal:

...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

and 5:1 continues,

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us....

Ephesians is probably a post-Pauline letter in the name of Paul and its theme is the church or the Christian community, so it is especially relevant to our concerns at present. One of the most moving pleas for the unity of the Body of Christ is found in the first 6 verses of Ephesians 4. Hear this eloquent appeal:

...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

And then concluding with the reality that there is one body and one God...and the following section continues in a most compelling fashion to plead for unity aiming at maturity in Christ.

So this is my pastoral concern—that we be very much aware of our own mode of being—self aware, self-critical, tending our own souls.

And then that we hear the plea for unity in the spirit of humility and love in the bonds of peace.

In a word, let Grace abound all around.

I honestly do not know what the future holds for Christ Community. I hope there is a strong and vibrant future. It may be such that once again I can feel at home there, finding my spirit lifted to the face of Mystery.

It may be that a future emerges such that for me there continues to be an absence of that for which my spirit yearns.

In either case there is no place for anger, for anger burns and destroys.

And no place for demonizing another, for that divides and alienates.

It is not my place to create that future.

In freedom, I will follow my heart, determined to be kind, tenderhearted, loving and seeking peace.