



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
4-10-16

Let's start with Jesus. I invite you to turn to page in the Bible and look again at this rather strange story at the end of the book of John.

In today's story Jesus appears to some disciples where they are fishing. Jesus appears where these men live and work. Jesus appears in the midst of daily life. And Jesus meets them there to assist them in their work – he tells them how to catch some fish. And Jesus meets them there to feed them. He is cooking fish for them and he has brought bread, which he shares with them. Now both those men and we are to understand that Jesus was there in a human form. Although it seems they were a little uncertain whether this person on the shore was Jesus, we are told that they settled on it being the Lord – a lord who broke bread and had a breakfast with them – a Lord who walked and talked and was truly present.

So these last few months I've been thinking a lot about how to understand church. What makes a church; how do we live together as a church? What is essential for being a church? We learn from the Passover meal, which we tend to call the Last Supper – that Jesus tells all followers to continue to gather together and remember him in a meal of bread and wine. He says we must do this – gather together and break bread together and remember Jesus is present with us. So we can look symbolically at this story of Jesus on the beach and say – Oh look – a communion experience. Jesus fed the disciples bread and fish. And I think that is an OK interpretation. He wants to be known to those fishing disciples and he wants to feed them and he wants them to remember him in the breaking of the bread. And he wants his disciples to not only love him but to continue to feed and care for his sheep – all of those others not there on that day.

I want to tell you a story about my Easter two weeks ago. It was a good day, a glorious day, a day of celebration with a wonderful breakfast at the church, and a worship service with a full church, with many people here singing and praying and coming forward to take communion at this rail. By most definitions of “church” – it was a good day for the church.

But then – this has never happened before in my life – we received three invitations to Easter dinner! At first glance it seemed impossible for us to do – but we didn't want to miss being with any of the people inviting us – so we decided to give it the “old college try” and we set out from our home at 12:30 and made the first meal at 1:00 held out of town on a ranch, we left there at 2:30, X-C skied into our next invitation on the upper Green arriving a bit after 3:30, we left there at 5:30 and drove to the other side of Pinedale, arriving at our last meal at 6:30 – just as they were preparing to carve the meat. We got back home at 8:30.

Now that was glorious!!! And to me – those experiences and those meals were as much church as the morning worship service. We broke bread together, we told stories, we communed and we shared and we cared for each other and we did it because we are the church. John and I would not have received any of those invitations into those homes if we had not met here – at worship in this space meeting these different families and human connections. For none of those meals were the same – each had its own flavor – its own personality present. They were all different and they were all part of the same church.

Now I am wrestling here with something that is very important to me. How can we live together most fully as the church on earth? How important is our gathering each week for a worship service in this space? For I truly believe we symbolically do here what is asked of us as disciples – we praise God through song, we pray, we hear God’s word spoken through scripture and sermon, we come to the table and receive Christ’s body and blood in a sacred act of communion. We come here to be strengthened to live as God’s people on earth. That is all essential to us for growing in our spiritual maturity. I don’t want anyone to hear me saying, Pastor Jami says Sunday worship isn’t that important. I believe it is important. I am NOT planning to dismiss our wonderful heritage of how we worship together with all the rich and ancient symbolism that has fed millions of people over the years. Traditional Sunday worship services will continue.

But are we missing the full richness of being the church? Have we become so symbolic in our worship as to make it otherworldly and not relevant to daily life? Is church as we traditionally know it missing the mark? Jesus fed people gathered on hillsides, gathered around a table, gathered in an inn in Emmaus, gathered on a rocky or sandy beach. Why have we made the communion meal so symbolic – with fancy altars and steps and rails prohibiting people from REALLY gathering around the table? Are we missing out on meaningful ways to gather as the church?

I’ve been telling my priest friends and some of you that I most love my job on any day other than Sundays! I’m a bit tongue in cheek but not totally. I love being with you as real people at your real jobs and in your real lives. I love sharing meals with you wherever we might gather – at the summer lunches, in homes and restaurants, around the tables in the basement here, perched under a pine tree in the snow, sitting on a deck with our beer and Bibles. I love hearing your stories – not listening to my own voice. And I love it when we teach each other, and I love, love, love talking about the Bible, faith, and God. And I wrestle with the emphasis placed on Sundays as the definition of church.

We have a new vestry and they will be a great vestry. And on that vestry are younger people who are willing to say – I don’t want to commit to showing up here every Sunday for a worship service. But I do want to be part of this church and I want to be part of it in new ways. So what are those new ways – and I want us to be honest here. Right now I gulp and think – oh rats – our numbers at Sunday worship are decreasing. Then I gulp and think – well, what are some new, healthy ways to be church, ways that teach, and praise God, and encourage others to grow in faith, to be committed and involved?

This is real stuff to me. Perhaps you’ve not given it much thought because your engagement with the church has been as and when you wish and I can be the one to deal with the church stuff. Yet, we are the Body of Christ together and we need to figure out being the church together, and for me this is about real life, real ways we live a life. So, I will be returning to these questions. I speak to you today to challenge you to start thinking about what is essential for us as a church? What will keep us growing in spiritual maturity into the full stature of Christ?

But as I said, let’s start with Jesus I now say, let’s return to Jesus. He asks Simon Peter, and all of us, whether we love him. The first two times he asks - the word used for love is agape love – fellowship love, gathering together, hanging out with each other. The last time he asks about loving him he uses phileos – brotherly love, intimate love, love that pledges you to each other as family. He asks us about a love that covers all the ways of living a life.

Do we love Him?

Thanks be to God.