

## SERMON

It's Not About Me

Pastor Jamie

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to spend a year on sabbatical. I used the time to explore where God might next be calling me. I was not altogether certain that it would be to another local church, but perhaps instead to some other form of ministry. Throughout the year, as I explored my own call, I listened to dozens of people who were hungry for a deeper relationship with God.

The search for God brought individuals to see me as a certified Spiritual Director. Some of those folks were members of churches in the Omaha area, but most had left the church behind for something “more”. Responding to a variety of requests, I worked with a friend and colleague to develop and lead several week-end retreats for my directees and any others who would be interested. While people were fed and felt that their relationship with God had indeed been strengthened, it was obvious that something was still definitely missing.

So that I might explore a variety of ways to work with people, I began to consult with a local storyteller. Rita helped me to develop my skill of telling stories, creating a style that worked well for me. As we talked and worked together, we visited about the hunger I was seeing and hearing in peoples’ stories. Over and over again I heard a desire for connection and a need for forgiveness and healing. Since we both believe in the power of story to heal many things, we designed a healing program that we thought might work well in both churches and synagogues.

A short six months into my sabbatical, it was time to tell the District Superintendent whether I wanted to take an extended leave of absence to continue exploring my call, or that I wanted to return to the local church. I met with my Covenant Group and they helped me to “hear” the things that I had been listening to and journaling about for over half a year. We paid particular attention to entries made following retreat experiences.

I had noticed after every retreat that there were several participants who had a very difficult time leaving the retreat. They would often be in tears the morning of the final day, and were the first to seek for mailing lists for retreat participants. I would hear from these participants between retreats, and they were the ones who were always pushing for the date of the next retreat.

As I remembered their stories, I realized that the majority of those who experienced this much pain at the end of the retreat were those who were making the journey alone; they were not involved in a church and they had little supportive community beyond what was created on retreat. Part of the growing distress they felt at the end of each retreat was that this community could never be again.

“We need to develop an on-going community,” I thought to myself. “Maybe that is my call...” I thought about this and it felt very right. I began to think about the kinds of things that would be necessary to address the needs I heard being expressed. “It would need to be something that occurred regularly...we would need some teaching opportunities...small group conversations...books...music...commitment, including a financial buy-in...ritual...” My Covenant Group looked on with amusement as I methodically listed these items and finally said, “Oh, my God! It sounds like the church!”

Without quite meaning to, I had been busy recreating the sustaining community that was the Early Christian Church. The strength of that early body was the sense of community and commitment that was necessary for an underground organization. The Followers of the Way would have been right at home in our nascent church, and shortly after this realization I contacted my DS and said I would be seeking another appointment in the spring.

When Larry gave me the title for this sermon today, I began to think about how I might speak to this topic—because for me, at a very elemental level, I DO think it is about me! I don't think it is ALL about me, but I know that we do best when we start there. "Who am I?" is an important developmental question.

As I was thinking about this, a voice spoke to me; not a "God" voice, but a radio voice. Earlier this week John and I went to participate in the taping of the NPR Radio Program called "Wait, Wait! Don't Tell Me." This is one of our favorite radio programs that we most often listen to by podcast because I am often working when it is broadcast.

Peter Sagal, the Host, started by welcoming the sold-out audience to the Lied. He said that the reason they were taping the show in Lincoln, NE was because of those of us who were gathered there. So this evening was for us; this evening was about us; and it happened because of us. Imagine my surprise when Peter said "...it is all about you! That's why we are here tonight!" And with that introduction we were off on a 90-minute-laughing tour of the week's news events. Revelations can come in unexpected ways.

You and I have been having this conversation about community in a variety of ways and in a variety of places over the last six months or so. We hear the disciples discussing it when they ask Jesus who will get to sit at his right hand in heaven...and when Peter wants Jesus to wash all of him rather than stopping at his feet. We see it in the fear of the disciples following Jesus' crucifixion as they separate and hide. But this is not just something we hear in the scriptures; we have also talked about it in staff meetings, at Trustees and Finance meetings, through the Lenten Class. When we talk about being a "consumer" instead of a citizen, we are in the midst of this conversation.

We can even go further back to last year's Lenten Class and a passage from Joyce Rupp's book, "Open the Door": "Focusing exclusively on one's own self-development leads to selfishness."

Of course, this is why we don't want people to think it is about them; we are so worried that people will get into/stay in the selfish side of this concept. And this is one of those places that I sometimes think may be a gender thing, too. A lot of women spend so much of their time focusing on what their children need...what their parents need...what their spouse needs...that they forget to take time for themselves, or feel too guilty about doing so that they just don't do it.

Joyce Rupp continues with her thought: "What is the purpose of [our self-development]? Is it only so that we can feel good about ourselves?" For many of us, the answer to that may actually be "yes" in the beginning; we are so hungry for meaning and affirmation that we will focus on meeting our own needs—that was certainly the case of several of those who were on the retreats I was leading. Rupp thinks that focusing on ourselves may be a "fine first step [on the spiritual journey], but eventually it must go further if it is to do us any good. It must lead to love and acceptance of others, to the recognition that our well-being is connected to the well-being of others, to the desire to help others find the well-being that we have found. It must lead to serving humanity via some constructive effort that we are uniquely qualified to do." In other words, the world will know us by our actions—our fruits.

Who I am and how I live out my relationship with the Divine Being is important. It is crucial for me to develop myself and my relationship with God. To not do so makes our relationship incomplete—or at least far less rich than it might be otherwise. Because this is

true, many have taken Christianity as a personal religion, a private relationship between me and God.

But Christianity is also shaped by our relationship with others. This is where we have to begin to shift our thinking from “it’s all about me,” to “what impact will this have on the community?” In this case, the community in question is the Church. Just as it is important for us to know ourselves as individuals, it is important for each church to recognize their particular gifts and relationship with God. This congregation has long been a “Peace with Justice” congregation, and you can easily see that when you look at many of our programs, you can hear it in the sermons...classes taught...conversations in the hallway. So each one of us has a relationship with this Church...but it does not stop there.

We are a connectional church. That means from the very beginning, we were connected to one another by virtue of John Wesley’s teaching and preaching. He very much understood Christianity to be both a private relationship with God and a public relationship with society. He taught that to be transformed by the love of God personally must lead a person to reach out to others to teach...preach...heal...and transform. Not only are we called to care for the least of these, we are called to change systems that perpetuate poverty and injustice. And, we work best when we work with others who are working on the same issues. So we are not just one church in one location, but a Church serving God in many different places.

Jesus uses the metaphor of vines and branches so that the disciples would understand just how dependent they were on him. Without our connection to Jesus, we would lose our connection to God. Without other branches, the harvest would be small. It is not just about the single branches but rather the entire vineyard. The health of the vineyard is necessary for God’s kingdom to be realized.

I know that it is not all about me, but I also know that I am an important part of God’s vineyard—as are you...and you...and all of you. This community is what it is because of each one of you coming together. What we have created together in worship this morning will never again be the same. But this community does not fall apart from week to week because we know that there are a large number of people who are committed to work for the kin-dom of God in this place right here. It is a fluid community where people enter and leave as is appropriate for their lives. We come searching for that deeper relationship with God—and something else that we may not quite know how to name; we want a place where we feel like we belong. Here, many of us are blessed with a community of people who are seeking for the same thing.

When I was growing up, I loved reading stories from a variety of different cultures. One of my favorite teaching stories is from China. An ancient father calls all of his sons to him; they all come—from the oldest at 68 to the youngest at 18. He directed each one to bring three sticks with him. When the sons gathered around their father, he began to speak.

“I have tried to teach you the importance of family and togetherness. But still you all go your separate ways! That makes you weak.”

He gestured to his oldest son and asked for one of his sticks. Eldest brother silently handed his father the smallest of the three sticks he had brought. The father took the stick, and with a quick flick of his wrists he broke the stick in two.

“You see?” he asked his sons. “I know that not all of you stay away from all of your brothers; you have heard my words, and so you join with one or two other brothers.” He gestured to

the next two oldest sons and took a stick from each. Again, a flick of the wrist and the sticks—even though the father held them together—were broken and tossed aside.

The next three sons were invited forward and handed their sticks to the ancient man. Three sticks together were a little harder to break, but broke them the father did. Wordlessly, the sons handed sticks to their father. Four sticks...broken; five sticks broken...six sticks...a lot harder, but broken. It wasn't until all ten sons had given their father their sticks together that the ancient man could no longer break the gathered sticks.

“Your strength lies in being together, doing things together. Go and talk...find a way of being together again.” Dismissing his sons, the father sat to contemplate the river which ran before him.

I began my sabbatical searching for what I needed to be made whole again. This year of quiet contemplation—which is where I, as an introvert, always first hear God speaking to me—led me to recreate the church. I needed to look inside to hear what God wanted me to do in the kin-dom being formed before my eyes. Each of our paths will be unique but introspection and outreach will be a common theme to all.

What I learned in that time apart designing a new way of being the church is that creating community takes work. It takes a lot of work. It takes the commitment of time and money on the behalf of many people. It is an endeavor of love and passion, and it does not happen just because we will it to be so.

This congregation is a wonderful community of believers who recognize the value of both a personal faith journey and the value of coming together as a whole. This congregation needs the commitment of your time and money in order to grow the vineyard God is calling us to be. The upcoming fundraiser is only one of the ways you can participate in this vineyard, but it is an important one. Help us to grow a strong and healthy vineyard, knowing that Christ is the vine, we are the branches, and God is the soil in which we are planted. Thanks be to God. Amen!