

“Doing Things Differently”
April 13, 2008

Mahatma Gandhi’s *Seven Social Sins*
Politics Without Principles
Wealth Without Work
Commerce Without Morality
Pleasure Without Conscience
Knowledge Without Character
Science Without Humanity
Worship Without Sacrifice

Acts 2:42-47

I was talking just a few days ago with a relatively new member of the congregation. This person had been going through some unexpected difficulties and, in those difficulties, had experienced some unexpected love, care, and support from the First Congregational Church of Sonoma. This member of FCC has been a member of other wonderful churches in other places but had never before felt so genuinely and generously cared for.

That wasn’t the first time I’d heard someone say something remarkably similar about this church. People with years of experiences in other congregations and people for whom this is their very first church have told me they’ve never experienced the kind of love and caring they’ve encountered here. No one has been under the illusion that this is anything other than a thoroughly human community with thoroughly human missteps, limitations, and occasional unkindnesses, but, over and over again, from people of different ages, perspectives, backgrounds, and personalities, I’ve heard that this is a church where love lives.

This has happened so many times that I’ve noticed a pattern in my own response to hearing this testimony about FCC. My initial response is simply to wonder how in the world I got to be so lucky and so blessed as to be called here to be your minister. My second response is a (usually silent) prayer that I and you and we will all be good, faithful stewards of this congregation as a community in which the Holy Spirit resides in such fullness. Then, the last thing that happens when I hear people describe the love and caring they’ve experienced in this church is I realize that no one can fully explain just how this came to be. I realize that this church and its unique character are, in a very important way, an utter mystery.

There are people here who have been members the First Congregational Church of Sonoma for fifty years, and they can’t explain it. They have some ideas, certainly, memories of times when the congregation seemed attuned and in tune with the movement of the Spirit, but these folks who know so much about the church can’t provide a roadmap or a history that tells us precisely how it became the church it is today.

I’ve been here only a paltry two years, and, even though it’s part of my calling to explore the congregation’s history and to understand its dynamics, past and present, I certainly don’t know the ins and outs of how God has molded this church into the shape it

is today. That process, as it has unfolded for over 130 years and as it continues to unfold today, is and always will be something of a sacred, blessed mystery.

But if all it is is a mystery, we're in a bit of trouble. If how this church came to be the particular community of faith that it is remains *nothing* but a mystery, you and I and we will always be at a loss about how to nurture it, care for it, and ensure that it *remains* a place where people encounter God's healing, transformative love through one another. So, without minimizing the mystery of God at work here in the present and the past, we need to have a way of understanding who we are as a gathered people of God and how we can continue to be a *faithful* people of God.

I've thought about this, prayed with it, sat in silence with the question in my heart, talked about it, and read about it, and I'm sure I'll do much more of all those things in the years to come. So, after all that thinking, praying, sitting, talking, and reading, I'm a bit embarrassed to tell you what I've come up with, but I'll tell you, anyway. ... One way of understanding how this congregation has become the congregation it is is that we try to do things differently here. I'll get to some of the content of that "difference" in just a few moments, but I want to stick with that generality for a second. The generality, the grand product of all my pondering and praying so far is that we try to do things differently. Not exactly rocket science, is it? If that's the best I can do, I've started to wonder if I should try to get at least a partial refund of my divinity school tuition!

But maybe not. This morning's reading from the second chapter of the Book of Acts is tackling the same question – not, of course, about the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC, but about the very early church. The Book of Acts is trying to describe and explain the power and the mystery of the earliest Christian communities, and it's trying to help other communities welcome and nurture the same power and mystery in their own midst. And, lo and behold, the explanation that Acts provides is no more rocket science than mine:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers ... [T]hey had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Here, then, is some of the content of how and what we and other gathered peoples of God try to do differently. In the words of the Book of Acts, we devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship. We can imagine that in the earliest Christian communities, the apostles themselves and then those who had known and heard them provided this "teaching" to which people devoted themselves, but that was nearly 2000 years ago. What teaching do *we* attend to, what teaching do we devote ourselves to that calls us to do things differently?

Well, in case you haven't noticed lately, we're a [point to cross] *Christian* church, so we as a community devote ourselves to the teachings in the Christian tradition, including the challenging, maddening, baffling, and healing teachings in the Bible. But here in this congregation and here in the United Church of Christ, we understand that God has not spoken once and for all; we understand that God is still speaking ... and still teaching. So we devote ourselves to learning what we can from ancient stories and ancient texts, but we also seek to hear and discover what God has been revealing in more recent times. We try, in other words, to listen for the word of God wherever, whenever,

and in whomever God is still speaking. So, this morning, we hear the words of Mahatma Gandhi, challenging all of us to live a life of principle, humility, and service.

We also try to follow the ancient church in devoting ourselves to fellowship. As the New Testament understands “fellowship” and as God calls us to *live* fellowship, it’s far more than socializing (although there’s nothing wrong with that) or networking (although there’s nothing wrong with that) or enjoying good food (although there’s nothing wrong with that, either). Christian fellowship, genuine human fellowship, requires us to go deeper, to risk being known and being seen, to give ourselves to one another and to the God who brings us together, and to let the truth that we are all bound together, as I said to the children, shape and guide *everything* we do.

Devoting ourselves to fellowship means doing things differently; it means trying to live the truth that we are part of what Martin Luther King called an “inescapable network of mutuality.” In a time and culture profoundly vulnerable to fear-driven, obsessive self-interest, this congregation is *called* to devote itself – and *tries* to devote itself – to a fellowship grounded in recognizing and caring for that network of mutuality and interdependence. We try to be and to nurture a community that knows that no one’s needs are unimportant and that we are all called to help meet those needs however we can.

The next to the last component of this morning’s not-rocket-science explanation from the Book of Acts of what’s different about Christian community is the early church’s devotion to “the breaking of bread.” Acts point us back to the central drama of the Christian story: the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the one Christians know as the Christ. The breaking of bread that we do when we celebrate communion doesn’t simply point us back to Jesus’ life and ministry. It also calls us to follow him in being willing, once again, to do things differently: to love our enemies, to forgive those who have wronged us, to see the spirit and beauty of God in people we might otherwise want to ignore or avoid, and to worship *with* sacrifice – to give ourselves, in other words, to the God who creates and loves the entire cosmos.

Then, finally, we come to the last words in the very first sentence in this morning’s passage from Acts: they devoted themselves “to the prayers.” This, too, tells us about doing things differently as church, as a gathered people of God. We, like those first Christians, are called to devote ourselves to the prayers – the prayers that remind us that we are all bound together with one another and with all life; the prayers that open us to become conduits of God’s unpredictable grace; the prayers that make our lives, our energies, and our love more available for God’s work of healing and justice in the world; the prayers that remind us of our unending need for God’s mercy and love.

Teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. We come together to learn from the past, the present, and from one another. We come together for fellowship, to risk experiencing the depth of our connections and let those connections here and far beyond these walls challenge and change us to our very core. We come together to remember and then continue the life and ministry of Jesus, who walked humbly with his God and gave himself fully in faith and trust. And we come together to enter into prayer – to be people open and available to the Spirit of God as it moves us all toward God’s vision of true Shalom ... not because God forgets about us and those we love if we don’t pray, but because *we* are in danger of forgetting God and not being a part of the Spirit’s movement in the world if we don’t pray.

And all of this, my beloved friends, we are called to do because it is life-giving, joy-creating, and blessing-sharing. Neither Jesus nor Gandhi was a killjoy. What they and so many other lovers of God have discovered is that living a life that honors the sacred nature of all humanity and all creation may be challenging – it may be hard in the sense of requiring all of who we are – but it’s also, more than anything else, a life that, in celebrating and loving and honoring that sacredness, is a full, rich, joyful life. Don’t ever fall for the lie that a life of faith is a dreary life. That is a slander on God ... and on our best selves. A life of faith is the opposite of dreary: it is a life of abundance, mystery, and love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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