

2-2-2017

Scripture Is. 55:1-3 Acts 2:43-47

Before I begin, I'd like you to know that in a sense, this is the first time I've done this. Not preaching... I have preached probably hundreds of sermons. But this is the first time I've done this. Let me explain...

When Rev. Nada asked me to preach and lead Worship today I started my Sermon prep as I always do, praying for my Congregation. Thinking about specific people, groups within the community here and what's going on in their lives, praying for them and seeking guidance from God as to the message my Congregation needs to hear this week. During this time of prayer it hit me that I have never done this before, preaching to my family. Every other time I have preached its been to a Congregation that has called me as Pastor or minister of some type. But today I stand here before you as one of you. Every week I sit in the pews with you and listen and learn alongside of you. I serve on church boards and committees, I enjoy church social and outreach events with you. My daughter goes to Sunday School and Youth Group with your children. We are members of this church family and I am preaching to my family for the first time. When I realized that I prayed even harder! The process, both the thinking and the emotional process of Sermon prep got a whole lot more intense when I realized I was preaching to my family. So I hope you'll appreciate the challenge before me today to present something for you to reflect on this week. I don't come with a sense of Call to support me but I come from the position of an insider and I only hope that from this perspective I have something to uplift you and to make you pray this week.

My parents had an incredible marriage! 48 years of steadfastly loving each other for better or for worse in sickness and in health. They had many tough times, yet they never gave up on each other! I think that may be why I am still single--I can't find that one in a million guy who would love me the way my parents loved each other.

When I was about 5 or 6 years old I wandered out of the family room one evening and passing through the kitchen I stopped in the doorway mesmerized by the scene. In the darkened living room, my parents held each other and slowly danced in the street light beam. No doubt Tony Bennett crooned in the background. I don't remember that though--I couldn't take my eyes off of them holding each other and slowly circling around. But then, being of a self-centered age, I just had to join them. I slowly crept across the floor and ducked under their arms placing one tiny stockinged foot on top of dad's huge polished wingtip, arm around his waist and finger looped through a belt loop, the other foot on top of mom's pointy pump, arm encircling her and fist grasping a bunch of dress, I tottered back and forth with them. Together the three of us plodded around in near perfect sync and I could feel their love all around me.

Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan Priest and contemporary theologian residing in Ohio, recently wrote a book entitled The Divine Dance. I hope he doesn't mind that I stole his title. In the opening chapters Rohr depicts a vision of the Trinity that reminds me of that dance between my parents that I joined one evening so long ago. Rohr's theological premise is that the Divine Trinity of God Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier is not three in one but a dance of those three --imagine if you will, an atom--the smallest seen particle of matter made up of a nucleus with protons and neutrons and outside the center, electrons wildly dancing around. All of that dancing giving off energy in the form of light and heat. Or as Rohr puts it, "One God, belovedly in Communion, as All-Vulnerable,

All-Embracing, and All-Given to you and me."Rohr sees God as a dance in which the energy given off creates, and redeems and makes holy. Godness is a divine dance to which we are all invited Further into his theological explanation, based on several well-known artistic portraits of the Trinity, Rohr depicts Godness as a meal in which the three enjoy fellowship and nourishment and there is room at the table for more. In fact, the subtitle of his book is *The Trinity and Your Transformation*

.The images of God as host, and dance and communal relationship make me think of the early Church. In our reading from Acts of the Apostles we heard that the early disciples of Jesus enjoyed each other's' company. Though the original apostles had not known each other when they accepted his call to to Come follow me, and they often had disagreements and power struggles, after his death they huddled together for comfort and safety because they had seen what had happened to him and they were afraid. After Pentecost they stayed together sharing all they had, praying and fellowshiping together and many converts were added to their number and these newbies were included in the sharing and worshipping community.They seemed to be of one heart and soul. No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but shared what they had. Daily they met together in the Temple and in their homes to Praise God and pray and fellowship. Many were added to their number. Who wouldn't be attracted to a group of close friends who take care of one another and live joyfully? Why not go check out what makes them live this way? Maybe I could be with them too.

This depiction of Christian Community feels to me like a dance. A great celebration.

On my journey I have had the privilege of being a part of many different Christian Communities. 2 of them in particular remind me of the Church in Jerusalem right after Pentecost. They both taught

me a great deal about what it means to be Church. I'd like to share some gleanings I gathered from my time within each of these churches..

My first experience with real Christian community came when I accepted a Call to ministry in Cincinnati Ohio. It was not the Call I'd been hoping for--but one much much better! Having completed an interim position in a tiny church in Vermont while still in Seminary, and then serving as solo Pastor in a tiny church in Connecticut, I was looking to advance my career along the usual path of Associate Pastor leading someday to a Senior Pastor position. After I interviewed with a large church in Cincinnati the search committee gave my name to a committee of churches uniting under the leadership of the World Council of Churches. They were seeking a Pastor to pastor their union or movement, or what???

There were about 30 mostly small, mostly poor, mostly non-denominational churches mostly in the very poor sections of Cincinnati, who had decided to work together to change their neighborhoods and the future of their youth. UCAN United Churches Active in Neighborhoods was born under a WCC grant with the contingency that they hire an ordained minister to lead them--to pastor and teach the mostly non college, non-seminary educated clergy and to help churches work around their differences in polity, traditions and creed and learn how to work together for the common goal of political and community reform. For some reason, someone on that Associate Pastor search committee thought I, a 26 year old short, white woman with only 3 years of ministerial experience, would be the right Pastor for the job! Still have no idea why they or I agreed!

UCAN had several large member churches with large impressive facilities and big budgets and equally big egos. It also had many many tiny with under 50 members, housed in storefronts, living

rooms, public school gyms and one tiny one room church building built by current members. I was blessed to know and serve amongst countless wonderful people and learned so much from them. Yet one tiny church stands out large in my memory. A , independent Bible based church with no ties to or traditions resembling any mainline denomination I knew of--and at Yale we'd studies the 50 largest denominations!

Within the first weeks of my time in Cincinnati I hooked up with Louise-- a large, kind, 80 something widow with a huge heart and an equally huge love of adventure. A child of the depression she had gone without and knew poverty like a family member. Later, her children grown and her successful husband passed away from a heart attack, Louise fulfilled her childhood dream. She painted every surface of her home pink, pink furniture, pink carpets, pink tile, pink counters, pink dishes, pink everything, including every article of clothing she wore and her handbag , shoes and even her hair tint. Pink Louise as she was called, knew her way around every nook and cranny of Cincinnati, and as there were no GPSes or cell phones at the time, I chose Pink Louise as my constant companion. I called her every night and told her where and when and she told me what time to pick her up.

One of our first visits was to this tiny storefront church I just mentioned. One late Summer evening we drove through a very dirty, scrawny neighborhood with a scary feeling in our hearts. Scary because few people were out, litter lined every curb, broken windows, burned out streetlamps, abandoned lots, no sign of any church here, Louise, you must have the wrong neighborhood. No Rev. Betsy, look over there. I pulled to the curb and saw what she meant. A handmade sign drawn on cardboard hung in the window of a darkened storefront-New Life Church. Yup, there was no mistaking it. We were here. I pulled myself together and opened my door as Louise's door

was opened and two young arms reached in and pulled her out of the bucket seat. Louise was escorted inside the church and seated on a double wide--two rickety metal folding chairs in the front row. We sat together looking around and she whispered to me, Rev. Betsy what is wrong with those candles? I looked up to see a small wooden table with a Bible and two small candle sticks--not the church supply size at all, and these grime encrusted candles, never lit. I explained to Louise that probably they could never light the candles because they couldn't afford new ones. Now that's a tight budget in reality!

Slowly a few more people entered the room and then a frail elderly man stood up and started to sing. And everyone joined him. Hymn after hymn of old church melodies sung from memory without hymnals or accompaniment. That tiny, dark storefront shook with the sounds and energy of Praise. Then he began to preach and pray, kind of mixing it all up. I was enthralled and terrified--I was supposed to be His Pastor???

Well, Pink Louise and the Lady Preacher returned to New Life Church often--always welcomed warmly. The people and Pastor of New Life taught me way more than I ever could teach them. They met Sunday mornings and evenings, Wednesday and Friday evenings too. They always brought whatever food they had and after prayer and praise they feasted together --often there really wasn't much to share but they laughed and fellowshiped and it really was a great feast! When someone needed a ride somewhere, or a babysitter, several offers came, youth helped the elderly with household chores or errands, aged members mentored younger ones. It was truly amazing to see how much they loved and cared about each other. Respect was genuine and visible. One Sunday we arrived for the evening service and came upon a young man standing on a rock in the empty lot aside the church preaching to the Sunday School and the Pastor crouched beside him, coaching him. No need for Seminary here--the next generation of leadership is taught

by the current one! Louise and I always loved our visits to this church because despite their poverty-the people were filled with joy and lived in community. The Pastor's favorite scripture was Isaiah 55. The one we heard as our first Scripture reading.Originally these words were spoken by the Prophet Isaiah to the exiles in Babylon. They were words of comfort and of exhortation. Through these words God was telling his people that he was there for them, to supply all they needed and to keep them safe. They only needed to turn to God. To listen to God, to heed God's ways. The covenant of David which promised the Holy Land as a sanctuary homeland for the children of Abraham was being restored for the exiles, and through David the Messiah would come, and through Messiah came salvation for all people. So, we are included in that Covenant, we are included in that Promise. The Pastor of New Life extended the meaning of that Promise further. He said that the Church was Christ's way of providing living water to the thirsty, food for the poor without money or in the poor with Spiritual need. Through the church all of our needs should be met! The Word of God preached and lived in Community is what feeds and sustains us and grows us into Christians.

I stayed in Cincinnati for about 3 years and watched in awe as 30+ churches of all sizes and budgets and creeds came together and Praised hard and worked hard, fellowshiped and learned and got a whole lot of neighborhood clean up done. More and more churches joined UCAN. We all learned together how to work with our local community, with State and City leaders and how to involve all members of the community to make downtown Cincinnati a better place to live, When I left UCAN was strong and vital and under their own leadership.

A few years later, while working as a Chaplain in a large State run Nursing Home in NYC I met a group of people who called themselves The Community. Founded in Rome in the 1960s, by three high school friends who were tired of the organized church, they met together to be like the Early

Church. They decided there were three things Jesus and his disciples always did and they would too. Worship and pray together, serve the poor and fellowship. They did this originally serving the poor around them--in the gypsy camps on the outside of Rome. Today communities of about 10 members exist all over the world. They meet daily for prayer in homes, they choose one poor population to serve-- like residents of a nursing home, or HIV patients or they set up a free afterschool program for kids whose parents work. They share holidays, birthdays and just any day as times for community celebration. They have no building, no budget, no leadership. The community became my family. I truly felt like I was living a Christian life better than in any Church. I had support for my ministry, true genuine prayer and praise that grew out of our service to the poor and our life in community, and people who really knew and cared about me. . Life within the Community is voluntary and open to all. Leadership is shared, disagreements arise and most of the time, through prayer and working together they can be overcome. This incredible experience of Church is the ideal for me and I strive to help build it wherever I am.

These 2 portraits of Church with leadership, calendars, buildings and budgets all trimmed away, feel to me very much like that church we heard about in Acts. The real heart of Church the people of God- has no money, or buildings involved. Just worshipping, sharing, serving one another and those outside your door.

It is true, we have inherited great land and buildings and with that gift comes great responsibility for it. But we also inherited a great tradition of people coming together to Worship, to serve and to fellowship. If our walls could talk, we'd hear incredible stories about how members supported each other through floods and damaging storms, men serving in so many wars--from the Revolutionary War to the present, epidemics, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights movements

and all of the daily events of life--the births, illnesses, deaths, new marriages, lost jobs, grandchildren, We have a responsibility to these gifts of community left us from past members with whom we are now joined through common covenant of membership.

While the vision of Church presented in Acts 2 is not possible in totality for us, I wonder what we can learn from it. Our children helped us understand the Meaning of the Divine Dance as it is represented in this Community of God. They drew into the house pictures of us ! People they love, people they don't know well but see at Worship and some fellowship and service events. They drew in images of our love freely shared through outreach--like the Thanksgiving turkey drive, TAVF, Community Dining Room, Sunday School. They too are part of the Dance. With us --we love them, nurture their faith and commitment to service as part of joining the dance sharing our loving energy to neighbor and stranger

Our Congregational polity fits well into this Theology of the Divine Dance of energy flowing between creator, redeemer, sanctifier and beckoning us to join in and dance with our energy too,

We as a whole entity are invited to join the Dance. We were created in and continue to be recreated by the acceptance of new members into our Covenant with God and each other. We definitely have disagreements with our members after all we are all self-centered children who cannot be satisfied merely gazing into our Divine Parents' eyes- we have to not only join--but at times, claim the Dance! When times are rough- we must stay in the Dance as sanctifying Spirit-acknowledging the gifts and vision of each other and putting forth great creative effort to find compromise and common ground so we can stay true to our work of redeeming and edifying each other while also sharing our dance outside our doors. When we dance with love within our

chosen Congregational family we gradually become transformed--less self-centered child, more grown up-- the adult emerging from adolescence with a firm foundation of the past and the courage to dance into the future.

When we don't find the strength, when we don't call upon our inner joy despite fatigue and battle weariness, we stay in a faith bounded by fear, Judging God not loving God. I know its very hard at times to find that inner strength to lift our feet and raise our hands and join the dance. That's where grace comes in. That's where the Divine Love each for each other reaches down and pulls us up into the Dance.

Our Congregation has been going through some tough times lately. We feel down as we see our numbers drop, less money coming in, less kids in Sunday School and camp, more openings we can't fill on boards. We get tired of being in decline. I can feel that in almost every conversation I am a part of. It doesn't feel like we are recreating, healing, making holy. We need to remember that Church is more than numbers, its about family. Remember tiny New Life Church I told you about--probably had a budget of zero. Met in an abandoned building so no building fees, no paid Pastor, or benefits or housing allowance, no candle line item, no hymnals, no music director. Just people coming together to praise God, to serve one another and to enjoy being together. The Community I was a part of in NY also had no budget and no leadership. They also had no building or expenses. Just people healed by Christ, created and and made holy by worshiping and serving others together, enjoying sharing life with each other. Maybe its time to spend a little less energy , not no energy, but less energy thinking about how we are going to make the budget and more energy caring for each other and serving others, and worshiping with true gratefulness. In my experience, when Congregations do the work of worship and outreach, and care of each other, they become new creations, healing takes place, holiness resides and the numbers follow.

While we have paid ministerial staff to lead us, we as members of this family have to do our part in ministering to each other. We are family members after all. And Family takes care of family.

Like the people of New Life Church and The Community, we must reach down and pull each other up in many simple ways--giving someone a ride to church, serving as a Stephens Minister, friendly phone calls, smiles instead of grumbling, child care, sitting with someone during Coffee Hour, invitations to dinner, spontaneous faith sharing, passing the peace with a genuine heart, saying I'm sorry, praying for each other, agreeing to disagree, coming to events like the Shrove Tuesday Pancake Supper, Christmas Caroling, the Lenten Program , being with one another as community... We all know there are things we should be doing. Too often we come to church from tiring, busy lives and just want to be fed--what can I get from this today? I confess there are times when I feel that way. Times when I rush to Coffee Hour to see a friend and don't notice someone sitting alone. Times I walk by someone to avoid getting into a conversation which might require something of my time and energy. We all need to think of how we can join the Dance--our part of creating our church, our part in healing our church, our part in making each other holy.

Please spend a little time this week praying about the Christians in Acts 2, the UCAN Churches, The Community, your own past church experiences and FCCB and your Divine Invitation to the Dance, Whether you prefer a slow dance in a darkened room or a wild, atomic , energy releasing jitterbug--try to think of at least one way you can dance with us. Just imagine, if we all do that what an incredible Dance of Transformation will be held at FCCB!