**Sermon 10-7-18**

**Paul Purdue preaching**

**World Communion: You can’t be a Christian by Yourself**

Imagine, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.  Christ faces the cross: the complex, entrenched, religiously motivated cumulative hatred of all humanity in one symbol act.   Will he fight, flee, or make a new pathway through love? The weight of a sinful world presses down upon him.

Who is with Jesus in the garden?  Will Peter, James, and John stay awake?  Will they hear his prayer? Did they listen as Jesus said *“I am very sad, it’s as if I am dying!*”  Will they bring a cool sponge for his forehead? Where is Thomas, who boasted,” *Let us go also, and die with him”?*  (John 11)

Who are these three, Jesus brings with him to the garden?  What kind of communion do they offer? Are they trustworthy spiritual partners, or people like us?  Peter will deny Jesus three times. James will lead the party of the circumcision. Some think, John, was the “certain young man”, who tried to follow Jesus and the arresting officers, but fled in his underwear, when questioned. (Mark 14).

Bonhoeffer writes: *“Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it sprang from a wish dream… (out of) a clamorous desire for something more… One who loves the dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of community.*” (Life Together) Jesus does not cast off Peter, James and John for their failures, no in their failure, we see Jesus’ forgiveness and charity more clearly- and Jesus creates community when  two or three gather in Christ’s name.

You can’t be a spiritual person without others. You can’t be a Christian by yourself.  Perhaps, You can’t be a Christian with just a small self selected band of christian friends.  John Wesley said “*Christianity is essentially a social religion; and to turn it into a solitary religion, is indeed to destroy it.*” *(Fourth Discourse on Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount*)  At baptism, we “*confess Jesus Christ as our Savior… (and) promise to serve him as Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to all people?”*

Why is that a Christian only grows within community?

First, Christians understand God in Trinity: Father-Son-Holy Spirit.  Creator- Redeemer- Sustainer, Light-Word-Love, Mother- Child- Bond, Making-Saving-Empowering, Lover- Beloved -Love.  Justice -Forgiveness -Peace, Faith -Hope -Love. Creator -Christ -Comforter. Sophia -Savior -Spirit. I can’t explain the Trinity. It is a Holy Mystery. However, The Triune God clearly teaches us that God exists in relationship.  Love only exists in relationship.

Second, the Bible is a story of God’s relationship with People.  Our Scriptures are not primarily, a series of Divinely dictated rules, but stories of God’s love and justice unfolding within people’s lives. It is a Book of events, people, and communities: Genesis, Exodus, Judges, Kings I and II, Song of Solomon, Nehemiah, Esther, Ruth and Job. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Peter I-III, Acts, Romans,  and Corinthians. Jesus called, Peter, James, John, Martha, Mary, Magdalene, and others to take up their cross and follow him. Jesus sent out 72 disciples to preach and heal. On Easter The Risen Lord commissioned Mary, The other Mary, Mary the Mother of James, Susanna and Magdalene to preach!

Third, try to imagine Jesus’ working alone. Jesus provided health care, feed people, led a Temple protest, listened to a Samaritan woman tell her story, and allowed an angry mob to crucify him.  Jesus hung on the cross, speaking forgiveness to people. Jesus came not to be served (having his needs met) but to serve others.

Fourth: Jesus’ great commandment  is “to love our neighbour as ourselves”.

The spiritual life only occurs in community.  We are created in the image of God. The liturgy found in Genesis One proclaims “*God created humankind in God’s  own image, in the image of God, The Creator created us; male and female God created us. And God blessed us…”.*

I am not sure if you can be a Christian in a small group of self-selected friends.  Jesus pokes holes in our incept self-selecting (market driven) notions of church saying: “*if you only love those who love you- how are you any different than anyone else?*  (Matthew 5:46)   If we demand a church that looks, acts, and thinks like us, then we seek a false church- a church made in our image- not God’s.

At the All Church retreat,  Steve Bryant and Kara Oliver reminded us of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life Together,. It was written to the leaders of the Confessing Church,who resisted Hitler’s rise. Bonhoeffer resisted unto death, being executed by a special order from Himmler just days before the allies liberated the concentration camp that imprisoned him.   Life Together  is a book about how to be the church- not how to grow the church.

Bonhoeffer says two things can build community.   Bonhoeffer names “human love” as a church growth mechanism. Human love (or god-less love) is directed towards others for its’ own sake. It loves others as objects to binds to itself.  It wants to gain, to capture, to be irresistible, to rule. It longs to have it’s love answered with love in return. It desires, consumes, subjugates, depends, and constraints. It serves it own interest without regard for truth.  It loves (so that it might feel loved). It fashions Christian community as a dreamy ideal. It uses those high ideals to judge and control others. It gets annoyed when people fall short.

However, Spiritual love (or God-breathed Love) does not desire, but rather it serves. It creates freedom.  It ceases from constantly scrutinizing, judging, condemning, putting people in their place. It realizes: *“God did not make this person as I would have made them... rather God made this person in God’s own image.”  I*ndeed, when Christ’s love grows within us we begin to see another brother or sisters sin as an occasion for realizing the forgiving love of God in Jesus!

Oh Friends, let us not be consumers of faith and destroyers of each other.  Let us not demand a church that speaks one language, holds one vision, does one ministry, utilizes one methodology, requires one theology, and enjoys one style.  Let us resist our preference for a community made in our own image- for that is self-affirming idolatry. Let us seek to find our community in Jesus Christ alone- who the Apostle Paul tells us breaks down every hostile dividing wall- bringing a peace and love that surpasses our understanding.  *“For Jesus Christ is our peace; through The Cross, Christ has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”* (Ephesians 2:13) Oh, May the Love of God be the bond that draws us together.  Our God does not cast off Peter, James John, the howling angry crowd or us, but loves us all until the end. *Let us love each other, as Christ loved us,* to the end. *Amen.*