

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Holy Comforter Church

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January 31, 2010

Let me start out by saying that this is a two part presentation. First, I want to talk a little about the diocesan convention held last week.

Second, I want to reflect a little while on the epistle – Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth.

We were in Winston-Salem last weekend at the diocesan convention. It was a pretty good meeting - as those kinds of things go, (I may have a bit of a crusty attitude about this kind of meeting – I have been attending them since 1968.)

But some good things happened. We voted to change the way that the amount of financial from parishes is calculated – we will all be given a 12% request for funding for 2011. This means that Holy Comforter, a church with a wonderful history of always meeting its diocesan asking, (we) will actually save money in this new plan.

You see not all churches have been meeting their obligation to the diocese, and the diocese has suffered as a result. This should correct this problem.

What has been happening over the last several years can be called ‘creeping congregationalism’. We are not a congregational church. We are a church with a structured form of governance. Democratically developed, but structured in such a manner as to have a hierarchy of authority.

When events in the life of the church haven't suited some of our people in some parishes, they have decided to vote with their money to show their displeasure. That is a poor theology of the church as it mimics the individualism that is so rampant in our culture and it belies and undercuts the very essence of Christian community. The nature of which is to stay in relationship, even when we are at odds with one another—especially when we are at odds with one another.

I am reminded of a lesson I heard given at an earlier convention. It was from the then president of the ECW. The message: "Those who are rowing the boat have a lot less time to rock it."

At this convention we also passed a resolution asking the General Assembly to grant in-state tuition status for children who may be undocumented but have grown up in North Carolina. This resolution is simply about justice for children of immigrants – but it is also in North Carolina's best interest in terms of having a future work force that is educated and productive.

We accomplished many other things and elected people to diocesan offices – including Tom Fennimore to Diocesan Council. We also packaged 100,000 meals for Stop Hunger Now.

It was a little unusual to be staying in the Marriott Hotel in Winston-Salem. I have been to many meetings and banquets in the hotel - but have never stayed there. A strange thing happened to me as we were standing in the lobby.

First let me say that the Marriott is decorated with pictures – photographs and prints of local Winston-Salem landmarks. So you get to see a lot of Old Salem, Wake Forest, Reynolda – you get the picture (pardon the pun.)

Back to the lobby, I went to the desk and asked for something – I don't remember what, but behind the counter were several large, black and white, framed photographs. The photograph in the middle of the three was of Reynolda Manor Theater (movie). It was a picture of the sign and marquee – now what was interesting about that is this – the movie that was playing was “Love Story” and there was a line out front. It had to be 1970 – the year of its release.

So What?

Here is what. That movie, which was a huge hit, had the worst advice about love of any movie, book, story, whatever – that has ever been given. What was the advice?

It was this statement: “Love means never having to say you are sorry!”

No, that is simply wrong – Love means having to say you are sorry - a lot. Here is why:

“Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

“Love never ends...”

When Jesus spoke to his old neighbors and friends in Nazareth he upset them.

As usual, Jesus gets himself into trouble by using, as examples of faithfulness, people who were outside of the ‘in’ group.

Jesus is justifying his position that a prophet is not accepted in the prophet's hometown. He reminds his listeners of situations wherein the prophets Elijah and Elisha were sent to minister to persons who were Gentiles – a widow at Zarephath in Sidon, and Nathan the Syrian -- even though there were persons with the same issues -- widows, lepers -- in the available Jewish population.

You remember that the text says that the people became furious with Jesus and wanted to stone him for blasphemy.

I have a “Recovery Bible” that attempts to interpret scripture in the context of recovery and recovery issues. Regarding the reaction of Jesus' old friends and neighbors to his teaching, the ‘Recovery’ commentary says: “The response of this hard-hearted, hometown crowd in Nazareth to Jesus' remarks is an example of what happens when denial is mixed with anger. When Jesus challenged their unbelief, their surface appreciation of his ministry turned to outrage. They wondered how this hometown boy could claim to be a prophet. Their attempt at mob violence showed how hysterical and resistant to the truth even religious people can be. We need to overcome the areas of denial in our life if we want God to step in and transform us into new and healthy people. God cannot heal us until we are willing to recognize our problems and our unbelief.”

Actually what Jesus was trying to tell people – he ultimately had to show them by his own sacrifice – he was trying to show them how God's love really works.

What is the word of prophecy that needs to be preached this morning? Simply this: The truth is that we do not need to work at being religious, we need to work at rowing the boat --- doing the work of ministry that needs doing --- binding up the broken hearted, bringing good news to the poor, visiting the sick and those in prison

--- we need to be recognizing our own brokenness and sinfulness so we can minister to the brokenness all around us --- for as we give ourselves wholly to others --- they and we will see the face of God.