

God's Ground Rules

Dedication Sunday September 18, 2005

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My brother Thad and I used to fight...a lot! Thad is four years older than me. He was kind of what you might call a late bloomer-in fact I think he is still blooming. But, the worst thing for Thad was that not only was I the only daughter in my family, I was the only Granddaughter on both sides of the family. I was the baby and only girl child to boot. This made Thad mad. Thad spent a lot of his time mad, and devising ways to make me squeal, scream, burst into tears-it seemed to make him feel better, like he had accomplished something really important. From my perspective, Thad was always the one responsible for starting our fights. Once they got started, I'll admit, I was an equal participant, but-as I would always say in self-defense to my mother, "he started it."

However, no matter how bad the fighting had been throughout the week, on Friday afternoons my mom would pick us up from school and after a trip to Gerrard's Grocery, Thad and I would get to go to the local toy store. Mostly we would just look, but every now and then we got to pick something out. My favorite was Slime, it was a green sticky goo that came in a small plastic trash can and sometimes, if you were lucky, it included little plastic eye balls-I loved that stuff. But the thing that always perplexed me was that no matter how many little time bombs my brother had knowingly set off through the week, he and I always got to choose a toy of equal value. My mother would say, much to my chagrin, that she loved us both the same and that what one got, the other would get and that was that!

So, Jesus is in the vineyard this week-see we are not the only ones into wine metaphors. He tells the disciples a parable that goes something like this; Jesus is likening God's kingdom to a landowner who agrees to pay his workers a "right" wage. Now the text doesn't tell us what that wage will be-it is going to be what is "right."(NRSV translation) I think that's important, a little hint there about economic justice, what is "right"-not what he can get away with, but what is "right." The long and the short of it is that he sends some workers out early in the day and some out at the end of the day and when all is said and done, all the workers get paid the same amount, a "right" wage. This of course leads to grumbling and the land owner says-(paraphrased) take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give this last the same as I gave to you. Am I not aloud to do what I want- with what belongs to me? Jesus is making the point that this is how it is with God, "the last will be first and the first will be last." New rules, God's ground rules!

Have you stopped to ask yourself what we are doing here this morning? What force of nature propelled us to drag ourselves out of bed and come here, some of us drug ourselves all the way from Cleveland and Iowa, and I am sure any number of other places. And here we are... together. How come? I believe it is because God wanted us here, I believe it is because we long for a new way of being in the world, we long to be in the company of those who long for justice, to quell our loneliness, our fears, to inspire hopes, our passions. I believe we are here this morning because this is the moment at which all of our hard work for the last two years is intersecting with our dreams of a home to call our own. I believe we are here because God has placed a Call on our lives and that call is to be liberated and to be a force of liberation for others.

This past week or so we have cleaned and scrubbed, we have built and planted, put up paper towel and soap dispensers, washed and put away dishes and worked together like a well oiled machine getting our new home ready for this day.

In addition to all that, we have marched in the Homestead Parade and hosted the Chamber of Commerce After Hours event - both firsts for OPUCC. We have sipped and dined, laughed and sang our hearts out. Each of you deserve much thanks and praise for your part in making all those things happen. This morning marks a moment in our history like no other. This is the day we say thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus, for you brought us, yes you brought us from a mighty, a mighty long way.

And now that we are here, now that we are in our very own building, with our very own windows that will need to be washed, floors that will need to be mopped, a kitchen that will need to be cleaned-we find ourselves in the necessary position of needing to set some rules, some guidelines will need to be put in place for the long term care of this building. But those aren't the only rules and guidelines that need to be established. There are also some spiritual and behavioral guidelines we will be about putting into place to insure the continued growth and well being of our beloved community and that is what I want to spend a little time exploring with you in the next few minutes.

Before we can establish guidelines however, we need to establish where we are coming from as a community-who we are when we come together. When we come together, Open Prairie apple of my eye-we are a blessed community of faith-on the margins. Claiming that identity is important, because it helps us understand the need for specific ground rules, a set of working assumptions that help to create, sustain and celebrate our particular community. And while on our own, out in the world, we may not be easily identifiable as marginalized people- and for some of us that is still an uncomfortable title, when

we come together in the name of Jesus Christ to serve the poorest of the poor, to stand in solidarity with the outcast in our midst, when we come together in this building to proclaim the radical welcome of inclusivity, it becomes very important that we not set ourselves apart from but rather proudly proclaim our place in and with the people of the margins.

Many of you remember hearing Bishop Yvette Flunder preach at Annual Meeting in Peoria, she has written about and for people like us, because she herself is a person serving a community on the margins. Her book is called, Where the Edge Gathers; building a community of radical inclusion. She makes many insightful points about being a community committed to radical inclusion. She says first, that in order to be radically inclusive, we must be radical. "Radical inclusion demands that we reach out to the farthest margin, intentionally, to give a clear message of welcome to every one." It is simply remarkable that OPUCC has grown from 40 to 116 members in the past year and a half largely by word of mouth alone. The time has come however, for us to become more intentional about getting the word of welcome out, the word about who and what we are and who is welcome here. Radical inclusivity demands radical outreach and radical hospitality, a notion not unfamiliar to us.

Bishop Flunder's book, lays out ground rules that offer support to us as we continue to establish our code of ethics, our compass of conduct. Ground rule number one; radical inclusion must be radical. Ground rule number two; we must celebrate and not hide or feel shameful about who and what we are. "Radical inclusivity recognizes, values, loves and celebrates people on the margin." Remember Jesus' public ministry was primarily with the most marginal of the margins.

Because the people who come to us have been hurt, ground rule number three is that we must be a church that recognizes the harm done in God's name. To use Yvette's words "Many people rejected by the church got their burns from Bible believing Christian flame-throwers. Contempt for the church and all things religious often stems from exposure to oppressive theology, biblical literalism, and unyielding traditions." This is why being very clear about who we are as a progressive church, an inclusive church, a safe church, is so important in Princeton Illinois, just off the Ronald Reagan trail and not far from Bible belt mentalities that have caused much hurt to many in our midst.

Ground rule number four, "Radical inclusivity requires a new way of seeing and a new way of being. Some way that both accepts who each of us is in a human sense and transcends our humanity, allowing us to see others as God sees us." I heard a story this week about a woman who is recovering from being in Hurricane

Katrina and although she and her family are safe now and living in an apartment in Boston, she keeps filling up her room with bottles of water and food. She had to go without for too long and it has thrown her into panic mode. Her husband wants the whole family to get into counseling as quickly as possible because he understands the importance of breaking that cycle.

Cycles like that one are hard to break, and theology that is rooted in scarcity thinking perpetuates a cycle of spiritual violence that the radically inclusive church must seek to overcome. What we know about that mode of being, because we have all seen it functioning or dysfunctioning in other situations, what we know is that when we or others engage in depravity thinking, we become willing to go to great lengths to make sure that what is ours does not get taken away from us. We can become very protective of it-territorial in a way. We have been warned to watch for that, by people who are concerned that having our own building might lead us to become insular. Indeed, we must work hard not to repeat unhealthy patterns in this community, because it would be very easy to do.

Ground rule five, “Radical inclusivity is best sustained and celebrated when everyone in the community is responsible and accountable. Sustaining Christian community requires an intentional effort to design a framework that includes everyone in the life of the church. The dissemination of duties and tasks ensure that all members share in and contribute to the welfare of the community.” We who are in leadership in this community have to continually work to grow up new leadership, we all have to watch for areas of our collective ministry that are in need of attention.

Friends what we are doing here is creating a community of abundance, of equality, of accountability. We are a team. We have agreed to take risks with one another by speaking the truth in love, by engaging in healthy dialogue where opinions might differ but mutual respect is an agreed upon core value, where resolving conflict means going to the source of the misunderstanding or hurt and talking it through. I cannot tell you how many stories I have heard about people leaving churches because of some hurt or misunderstanding. When I asked if they ever talked to the person about it they say, no. In the radically inclusive community, we must talk through to a place of healing.

Last point and then we will get on with the dedication-Bishop Flunder notes that, “(just) because visibly marginalized people are together in community does not mean that each affirms the other, or that their common marginality will hold the community together. Conversely, people who have been oppressed often learn to oppress by assimilating the oppressor in an effort to gain power and influence.

There must be glue to hold a community on the margin together, something that continuously defines and strengthens the essence of the community.”

In Paul’s letter to the Colossians he gives us that glue, “As God’s chosen ones, clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, (an occasional red velvet dress,) and patience. Bear with one another.” These words are extremely relevant to us right now...these folks like us, were doing it all for the first time, and Paul knew that requires a special kind of patience and grace. Finely Paul writes, “above all clothe yourself with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

And so Open Prairie - here we are in a living, breathing love letter to God. May this sanctuary, these offices, these classrooms, this kitchen and that storage room-be our living testament to a community living out God’s radical inclusivity. Together let us live boldly, love loudly, and let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts this day and forever more. Amen