

From the Pulpit of Trinitarian Congregational Church...

Sunday, May 10, 2015

Preacher: Rev. Julie Olmsted

Scripture: John 15: 9-17

Sermon: The Invisible Tattoo

When my daughter became a Girl Scout back in New York, we went to the sporting goods store and bought all of the accompanying paraphernalia. We bought the sash, the vest, the skirt, the knee socks, the little purse, and the kerchief. I believe that she wore absolutely every bit of that paraphernalia the first day of Girl Scouts. That was it. Thereafter, I was lucky if I could get her to wear one thing, that is, if either of us remembered that she had a meeting that day!

There are uniforms to identify all kinds of people in our society. I used feel comforted when I saw, for example a nurse all dressed in white, nice and crisp and professional, like they know they make a difference in people's lives. When someone fixes my car and he or she actually is well groomed, has on a uniform with his or her name on it (even a tee-shirt), I think to myself, "This person knows what he's doing; my car is going to be fixed in fine order." I feel reassured. Many people share this kind of perception of those in uniform, especially if they also have a good grooming and a "spiffy" attitude. Most of us like to look good regardless of the fashion of the day, and we like others around us to look good, too. We are reassured somehow that everything is in good order. Our future is in good hands. We all love to see young people in uniform, at least I do. As a young woman, I certainly enjoyed seeing a young and handsome military man. When I first met my husband, I invited him to an evening event at which I instructed him to "spiff up," just so I could see if he knew how to dress up! (When I first saw him he had on jeans and a sweatshirt, which was fine, too!)

Different religions have different identifying attire and headaddresses. The Muslims have their robes and veils and head gear. The Seiks have their turbans. The Jews have their yamilkas. When I was young I always thought it was cool that the Catholic women wore the lacy doilies on top of their heads when they went to church. In New York City the Catholics would receive their ashes at noon on Maundy Thursday, which I also appreciated; it identified them as Christians and special somehow. But

my faith has matured somewhat and I now know symbols or signs do not a Christian make.

Jesus says in the gospel of Mark: “let the children come and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” Jesus was not just being nice to the children. He understood that it was important to make a significant point here. Jesus recognized teaching moments like most of us recognize signs for food and gas on the turnpike. He was always ready to illuminate something critical to the faith. You may not know that this story is found not only in Mark, but in Matthew and Luke as well. When a story appears in three out of four gospels, it is a good idea to go deep with our reflections. It is good to ask questions. It is good to turn it over, so like a diamond, the sun can shine through it in different ways. What does it mean to “become as a child?” And further, how could it relate to entering “God’s realm,” (the kingdom of God)? Is there a sign? Is there a uniform? Is there a way you or anyone, for that matter, can identify a child of God, or for us, as Christians, from anyone else? Is there a “mark” or some “tattoo” that can assure entry? Is there a badge of identification? Of course there isn’t.

Here in our Scripture reading in the book of John we have what is known as the Great Commandment. It is also referenced in John 13:34 and John 17:23. That is, we should love God and love our neighbor and that everything else hinges upon that. This is the Christian’s plumb line, that by which everything else is evaluated and understood in the Bible. How do we do that? We become as children ourselves. We make ourselves teachable, coachable, flexible and open. We are willing to be wrong, to see things from another’s point of view. We are willing to suspend our judgment of others, to give them a break, to acknowledge that we see “through a glass darkly,” as Paul says in Corinthians 13. We understand (also from this scripture) that love does not insist on its own way. This is becoming as children, this is the way to love. Love cannot show up otherwise.

See, children know they don’t know everything. It seems that the age when they start to think they know everything is younger and younger, but the archetype of the child is what I’m talking about. It’s an archetype of not knowing, of openness. It is honoring the “other.” In yoga class, the instructor usually says, “Namaste,” at the end. This means, “The divine light in me honors the divine light in you.” You could say, “The light of Christ in me honors the light of Christ in you.” We get glimpses of the kingdom when we walk in this Way. We may even enter it. But there is no “mark.” There is no uniform. There is no sash. There is no headdress. There is no tattoo that shows we are a part of this great and privileged way of Being and walking in the world. There is just God’s light shining through us to bless and edify and build up and make peace. We go to church. We engage in spiritual practices to learn to speak and

act in these ways. It is discipline.

This is our invisible tattoo. This is our “un-uniform.” This is how we are known, as it says in the song, “They will know we are Christian by our love, by our love.” We stand without judgment (we leave that to God). We stand without hatred. We stand in the love of Christ and it is beautiful and holy ground. This is what we offer to those around us, when we become as little children, expressing love and gratitude and joy.