

From the Pulpit of Trinitarian Congregational Church...

Sunday, June 7, 2015

Preacher: Rev. Julie Olmsted

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4: 13-18

Sermon: Life Together

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906 – 1945, was a Lutheran minister who lived in Germany and was killed by the Nazis. His thoughts and writings on discipleship and Christian community are as relevant today as ever, still subjects of lively discussion in theological circles and in thoughtful Christian communities. In his classic book, *Life Together*, on the Christian life as expressed in the church, he gives a template for a church body that thrives and grows, but most importantly, that remains true to what he believes is God's original intent through Christ. It is a small but powerful book that I read in seminary. It leaves an impression of what is possible when believers and questioning believers come together for this experiment called the church.

I call the church God's experiment of what's possible for human beings. That makes our life together so much more interesting. On this beautiful New Members' Sunday, I'd like to share with you some of Bonhoeffer's points, Paul's points, and one or two of my own.

First and foremost, the church should be a community of love. (MLK called this later Beloved Community.) Love should be at the center of everything we say and do. Most of us are not filled with love all of the time. That is the purpose of prayer and meditation. That is the purpose of our worship together: to access and have the possibility of communicating, serving and living in a commitment to (and experience of) love for God and thereby love for one another. There is a lot of overlooking of faults involved in this. We cover one another's so-called sins with our love. Love rules. This is allowing our resentments and dislikes, and even our ordinary annoyances with each other to just flow through us. We don't hang onto them. We hang onto God instead, and God's promises.

The idea that Christ is the Head of the Church is not poetry (although it is pleasing and beautiful). This is a relinquishment of our egos. This discipline forfeits the right to speak disparagingly about one another. This discipline requires self-control and thoughtfulness in the ways we speak to and about each other. This implies a willingness, always, to be wrong, to listen to others, and as far as possible, without judgment, and with compassion. Sometimes when we cannot agree on something, we

set it aside for another time, when more is revealed. We let things be because we don't have to have it right all the time, and we don't have to have it right now. This is the church at its best, when we can get through disagreements, safeguarding everyone's dignity, and asking God to purify our motives, which can be pretty dark.

Bonhoeffer states that we will remain lonely in our beloved community if we only live as devout people and believers. We will not break through to true fellowship if we cannot acknowledge our sin (our faults, our shortcomings) with one another. What do we mean by sin? Our dark side, our petty natures, our selfish imperfections. I like to say that to sin does not make us bad; to sin makes us human. My prayer for all of us is that we can tell the truth to each other, that we can laugh at our imperfections and cry for each other's struggles and weaknesses, that we can be strong for one another and forgive each other for being weak, angry, petty, and annoying. And through this honesty and sharing, we grow spiritually. That is what most people in the world are seeking, a chance to grow spiritually, not just go through the motions of worship.

Worship is at the heart of our life together. I know we cannot come every week. There are times we are traveling or we are sick or we have to be somewhere else. But some people stay away because they are feeling down. That's when to get to church. Some people don't come because they're angry with someone. That's when to get to church and make peace quickly. It just doesn't make sense to turn away from spiritual nourishment when that's exactly what you are in need of.

When we share joys and concerns, even when we do the announcements, we are getting out of ourselves as individuals and behaving as the Body of Christ. Especially with music, singing together, we transcend the prison of our own personalities and problems, and plug into the eternal and the divine. Bonhoeffer says of music: Music... will help dissolve your perplexities and purify your character and sensibilities, and in time of care and sorrow, will keep a fountain of joy alive in you."

When you and I can learn to live together with goodwill and encouragement, when we can check our egos at the door and come together to give thanks and praise, the Spirit can bless us. We are not just a bunch of folks gathering once a week out of habit. We are a blessing to others, to the community around us. That is our goal, to be a blessing to those outside these walls. This grace extends to all people, believer, non-believer, rich, poor, straight, gay, black, white and brown. The outward nature may be (in the words of Paul) wasting away; but inwardly we are forever young. Now, tell me, who wouldn't want all that?

This short sermon was in honor of New Member Sunday. We joyfully accepted into our fold 7 new/transferring members. What a joy it was!!!

