

SLD09.18.11 Sacred Communities Series
Emory Presbyterian Church
Philippians 1:12-18, John 3:8a
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“Sacred Space in Cyberspace”
The Koinonia Congregational Church of Second Life

This week marks the penultimate service in this sermon series about sacred communities. Next week I shall try to summarize some of what we've learned from the eleven or so communities we've examined this summer.

You recall that we started with a sort of rubric of characteristics or practices of fruitful congregations¹ with which to measure, or through which to regard, the diverse communities of this summer's list, which ranged from the early church in Acts, to the 13th century Beguines, to the new L'Arche community just down the road in Decatur.

Because this next community we're about to explore may be a bit of a stretch for some of us to relate to, perhaps even to countenance, I'd like to remind us of the characteristics of a fruitful community of faith that we embraced: radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service and extravagant generosity. I'll say them again because it's a long list to take in all at once: the characteristics of a fruitful, healthy, Christ-centered communion are radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity.

Let's keep these in mind as we begin our exploration of today's community which is the Koinonia Congregational Church of Second Life. Members of the Koinonia Church call themselves 'progressive Christians,' and by that they mean that they - and

¹ Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations, Robert Schnase, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tn., 1989.

I'm reading now from what they call their 'Eight Points' (think of them as their Identity, Mission and Covenant statements all rolled into one) They

Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.

Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.

Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples (passionate worship?)

Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable (radical hospitality?) including but not limited to:

- * believers and agnostics,**
- * conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,**
- * women and men,**
- * those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,**
- * those of all races and cultures,**
- * those of all classes and abilities,**
- * those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;**
- * without imposing on them the necessity of becoming like us.**

Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe.

Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty - more value in questioning than in absolutes. (intentional faith development?)

Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers. (risk-taking mission?)

Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege. (extravagant generosity?)

This is the Koinonia Congregational Church. Of Second Life. But what the heck is 'Second Life?'

Well, for starters, think of what we've got going on right here and now as First Life. In First Life, the life that you and I know best, we can look around and see each other as we present ourselves. I'm the one with the robe and the glasses; Elise is sporting her adorable dress of the week; Stewart's got on a tie, and Betty's nails are prettier than anyone's here.

Another feature of First Life is that you can knock on the thing in front of you and feel it. This is the pulpit. This is the mike. This is the sanctuary we'll abandon in a few weeks in order to replace our hvac system.

In First Life we can look at each other face to face, read one another's expressions, touch each other, sing together, share an awareness of our shared space.

But of course, you say. What other life could there be?

Well, what I've discovered here of late is that there is also *Second Life*, which is a virtual world. That is, it exists only on-line, only on a computer. Well, and in peoples' hearts and imaginations...and pocketbooks.

According to Wikipedia², a virtual world is an online community that takes on the form of a computer-based simulated environment through which users can interact with one another, and use and create objects. It is an interactive 3D virtual environment. That is, you can walk (or fly) around in Second Life and meet people and have experiences and start businesses and build neighborhoods and playgrounds and ... you guessed it...churches. In fact, you can find and experience just about everything in Second Life that you can find and experience in First Life except maybe touch, though I'm not too sure about that.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_world

Think of Second Life as a parallel universe in which human beings live and explore and relate and transact...really. I mean, most of *us* don't. Most of us haven't even *heard* of Second Life, never mind hung out in it. But there are people who do. A lot of people. As in over a million people this year.

Launched in 2003 by one Philip Rosedale ('Philip Linden' in Second Life – in Second Life you get to choose a new name *and* a new look – me, I'm going for Betty's nails), the Second Life world is structured as a group of islands in the tropics.

So here are over a million (and growing) people from all over the First Life world hanging out and strutting their stuff in this parallel virtual Second Life island world, meeting each other, forming relationships, falling in love, conducting business, trading services, creating learning communities, clubs, gangs, all kinds of social networks. Countless Second Life cultures and subcultures are organized around arts, sports, games and other areas. Long-term and committed AA groups have formed themselves in Second Life. Believe it or not, folks, Second Life is really happening, all over and all the time.

I'm reminded of when I first met Bonneau Dickson's son, Sam, one day when I was having lunch with Bonneau in his home. Sam walks in the door with not so much as a howdy-do and announces to me, "I don't believe in women preachers." To which I replied, 'no, look Sam, here's one. You can touch me. I'm really here.'

Well, Second Life is really here, too, (even if you can't touch it) and so far as I can see, whether we acknowledge it or not, it ain't going away. In fact, it's liable to grow faster than just about any other modern day innovation to date. And in case you wonder if only geeks and nerds are taking Second World seriously, 'real' companies,

such as Coca-Cola and Adidas already regard Second Life as a marketing venue. Numerous universities including Harvard, Princeton and Vassar offer online classes in Second World. Sweden and the Maldives have created virtual *embassies* there.³ And, of perhaps most relevance to us this morning, many religious organizations have established an active presence in Second Life.

The Koinonia Congregational Church is one such religious organization, founded 4 ½ years ago by Kimberly Knight, a graduate of Candler School of Theology and candidate for ordination in the UCC church. When I had lunch with Kimberly last week, she reminded me that she had made a presentation about Second Life a few years ago right here at Emory Church at one of our Wednesday Night Programs. And I was there.

(As my mother would say, 'don't get old.')

Anyway, it all started back when Kimberly playing around with the idea of creating a pub in Second Life where people could gather casually to talk about stuff. As often happens in the company of an extroverted seminary student, spirituality, beliefs, and past experiences with churches, dominated the conversation. Eventually the gathered group, growing in relationship and trust, decided to form its own worship community – a Second Life new church development, if you will.

For Kimberly personally, the enterprise represented a rich synthesis of her own 'emergent church' thinking, her Baptist roots, her increasingly progressive view of Christianity, and everything she was learning at Candler. And how satisfying it was to create a worship facility for this group, a sanctuary they could create themselves that would reflect in a meaningful way what they professed to believe.

³ <http://www.answers.com/topic/second-life#ixzz1Y8SYlikC>

You can go see the Koinonia Church on-line.⁴ It's a tall handsome building with regal columns in front, a glass ceiling so one can always see the sky, and no doors, so there is nothing to lock anyone in or out. The gathering space is casual, with chairs and pillows in a circle. Worship style differs considerably according to which of the three or four pastors has designed it, though Kimberly's own style is liturgically fairly mainstream. She favors what she calls "open source preaching," in which she offers some introductory exegetical remarks and then opens the floor for the group to participate in 'unpacking' the meaning of a text.

In case you'd ever like to join them, Koinonia's worship is at 9:00 p.m. on Wednesday evenings. They have bible studies and book discussion groups at other times, as well.

Though why on earth would anyone want to go to church on-line?!

Kimberly says a lot of the folks who show up at Koinonia are either 'seekers,' a name I actually prefer for most church-goers with its implication of a certain open heart- and mindedness, or 'church-wounded,' people who have been hurt, marginalized, or judged and rejected by a traditional community of faith. Koinonia is a safe and welcoming space where these people know they will be accepted, nurtured and grown in discipleship whoever they are, and however they appear.

Another reason one might be drawn to virtual church is if one is differently abled, aged, or incapacitated in some way that limits one's mobility.

Others who might not be caught dead in a traditional church are yet attracted to Second Life Gospel churches because they are up for exploring spiritual questions, even worshipping, in the safety of their own study.

⁴ <http://web.mac.com/seekingsophia/koinonia/Welcome.html>

And I have to ask you, was there never a Sunday when you just didn't feel like getting up and pulling yourself together in order show up for worship? Ever had a Sunday when you just didn't feel like being nice to a lot of people? Ever had a Sunday when you just didn't feel like getting out of your jammies?

Well, Koinonia is the church for you and me on Sundays like that.

In fact, Kimberly says I haven't really preached until I'm sitting in a comfy chair in front of a fire with a glass of wine in my hand.

Seriously, though, I know the idea of a Second Life gospel is a little weird and not without its drawbacks, but can you begin to see a place for a church like Koinonia? A thoughtful, intentional place of worship where people can gather in God's and one another's presence?

A recent piece in a Jesuit journal has brought new attention to the possibilities for evangelism in Second Life. One Father Spadaro urges Catholics to go out into Second Life to (quote)

*lead the cyber-embodiments of their fellow men and women out of the many temptations that exist there. (And believe me, there are some serious temptations available). Still, says Father Spadaro, "While the virtual world might be a refuge for some people seeking to flee the real one, it is also full of people seeking something more from life, including, possibly, religious enlightenment. Deep down," he says, "the digital world can be considered, in its way, mission territory. Second Life (offers) the opportunity to meet people and to (help them) grow."*⁵

In a church like this one in which we so value our lovely facility and treasure one another's physical presence whenever we turn our hearts to God, it may be a little tough to relate to the appeal, never mind the efficacy, of cyber-worship. But imagine the advantages of no facility maintenance, no weather, no electric bills, no 'work days.'

⁵ <http://www.internetevangelismday.com/secondlife-evangelism.php>

Imagine, too, infinite accessibility (at least once you figure out how to navigate in Second Life. I showed up at Koinonia last night and couldn't figure out how to leave. In fact, I couldn't actually figure out how to turn around. Had to leave a note for Kimberly to feel free to eject me if my goofy rabbit avatar were in the way.)

But consider the infinite resource of itunes for musical selections, the two-way communication during worship, the option for electronic confession – I'm not kidding – there's many a wounded one who has felt free to 'come out' in the safe, supportive environment and pastoral care of Koinonia. The connections, the relationships, the group dynamic of even a virtual community are real and dynamic, challenging and healing.

I suppose I'm offering something of an apologetic for Koinonia and Kimberly's community. And I should confess that *in her presence* I have no doubt whatsoever of her intelligence, imagination, creativity and love both for God and for her flock. But if you still can't imagine the relevancy of a virtual community of faith for you, personally, at least consider with me the following questions:

* What, fundamentally, is the nature of community?

* What is the nature of how people seek community today?

Another way to ask that might be - how dependent are you on our weekly e-mail to remember what all's going on in the church? -or- conversely, how left out do you feel if you don't have e-mail?

How has Facebook, Twitter, blogs and other social media impacted how people connect to each other today?

How important to you was Tina Naegle's blog during John's lengthy illness and demise?

* How is participation in Second Life gospel churches different than people watching tv evangelists?

In a memoir I'm reading right now called All Over But the Shoutin', Rick Bragg notes that "If I live to be a hundred, I will never forget (my momma), eyes closed, lips moving in prayer, both hands pressed to the warm plastic top of the black-and-white television. On the screen was a young Oral Roberts in shades of gray, assuring my momma that God was close, that she could feel Him if her faith were strong enough, coursing through that second hand Zenith. ...That faith, that belief, made the unbearable somehow bearable for her, and the loneliness, a little less. ...The promise of heaven...was balm," writes Bragg, "even if you had to turn the antenna to fix the prophet's horizontal roll."⁶

What does Koinonia offer that Oral Roberts did not?

* What sort of potential do Second Life churches offer for the aged, the differently-abled, the ill, the afraid, the ashamed, the rejected, the young, the bored (which are often the same thing), or the just plain lazy but still seeking?

Paul could have been in Rome or Caesarea or Ephesus when he wrote his letter to the church in Phillipi. But wherever he was, his imprisonment has turned out to be an occasion for joy because, as it turns out, it's actually helped spread the gospel, and to the most unlikely of audiences, the Roman imperial guard! There are a lot of reasons people proclaim the gospel, says Paul, and not all of them particularly appealing. But 'what does it matter' he asks, "so long as Christ is proclaimed in every way?" The wind, after all, blows where it chooses.

And who knows? asks one observer. "Five years from now, your friendly neighborhood Christian church may even have a *Second Life* missionary on staff."⁷

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁶ Rick Bragg, All Over but the Shoutin', Random House, Inc., New York, 1997, pp. 79-80.

⁷ www.thinkchristian.net/index.php/2007/08/03/born-again-in-second-life/. Born again in *Second Life*
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