

SLD09.25.11 15th Sunday after Pentecost
Summary of Summer Sermon Series on Sacred Communities
Matthew 28:16-20
Emory Presbyterian Church
Jill Oglesby Evans

Where Do We Fit?

This morning we'll be wrapping up the lengthy summer series on sacred communities that we started back in June. And I'm here to tell you, from the first century church in Acts to the 21st century post-modern, post-material, virtual church, we've flat covered some territory!

The text I chose to open the series is the same text we just heard today to close it: Matthew 28:16-20, in which Jesus tells his disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." It's the text commonly known as The Great Commission, Jesus' marching orders to all who follow him to spread the Word, the Good News, the *euangélion* Tom's been teaching us about these last couple Wednesday nights, the good news of the acceptance and love and forgiveness and restoration and new life that God works through Christ Jesus.

This is what the church is about, any church, every church, this church – the "e" word that makes us Presbyterians so uncomfortable – "evangelism" – though only because we imagine that it asks something different of us than who and how we are ordinarily. It doesn't. Evangelism, sharing the good news of the wholeness found in Christ Jesus, requires only that we share our stumbling, searching, sinning, yet once in a while grace-touched selves, just as we are.

Surely if there's anything at all we've learned from checking out this slew of summer sacred communities, it's that sharing Christ's loving world with the world has a whole lot less to do communicating particular doctrine or creed than it does with believers figuring

out a way to integrate their faith into who and how they are “ordinarily,” not just when they’re in “pious” mode but throughout the ins and outs and ups and downs of their lives...together.

In the recent decade, as most of you know, we’ve spent our summers exploring the lives of how various individuals, “saints,” we like to call them, organize their lives and work to integrate, model and share God’s Word. But this summer we’ve been looking at how a *wide variety of communities* over the ages have, with varying degrees of temporal, and mostly temporary, success, organized their lives and work to integrate and model God’s hope and healing.

The underlying question throughout our exploration has been simply, “what do these communities model for us? What can we learn from them? Besides their particular stories, their his- and her-stories, how do the risks and hopes and practices of other sacred communities inform our sacred community here at EPC?”

The paradigm, or rubric, by which we implicitly or explicitly regarded each of the communities of this series has been comprised of Robert Schnase’s Five Faithful Practices of Fruitful Congregations,¹ hospitality, worship, faith development, mission, and generosity. Only recall that Schnase adds to these some qualifiers, qualifiers which arguably might be used to describe Jesus: radical, passionate, intentional, risk-taking, extravagant.

Notice there’s nothing in the list about church location, size, program or budget. Nary a word about church growth, polity, facility, or even doctrine. Rather, as we examined our various sacred communities, what we were on the lookout for was

Radical hospitality
Passionate worship
Intentional faith development

¹ *Five Faithful Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, Robert Schanse, (Bishop, Missouri Conference, The United Methodist Church, Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tn. 2007.

*Risk-taking mission, and
Extravagant generosity*

Just to see how others went about it.

We started with the honeymoon of the first century Church as described in Acts. Like many new loves, the early church was known for its passionate, exuberant nature. Ever since that first Pentecost, early Christians tended to get “carried away” with the juicy intensity of their experience of the Holy. The prevailing mood was jubilant, energized, optimistic; early believers felt, quite literally, “on top of the world.” That is, on top of, and free from, a world of oppression and suffering and death. And how did they organize themselves? What did they do together? Why, they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship and eating, to studying and sharing and hanging out together.

And in the course of all that worshipping and studying and hanging out, an atmosphere developed among them, a disposition, a shared frame of mind, in which they started claiming one another as family, as brothers and sisters in Christ. At first it was all really quite heady. Everybody started selling their stuff and sharing the proceeds....

Only, you know how it goes; the old 80:20 rule kicked in, with only a few people doing all the selling and sharing and working. Until finally somebody organized folks into elders and deacons who led and delegated tasks in a decent and orderly fashion, and the Presbyterian church was born.

Still, you know how it goes; people started fussing about who was doing more and who wasn’t pitching in... who had actually sold Aunt Betty’s sapphire ring and given the proceeds away, and who was just, you know, riding the wave, tucking the family silver under the mattress. You know.

And then, of course, there was that pesky problem of the world not going on and ending the way everybody was geared up for it to.

So, to be sure, we learned something from the freshness and vitality of the early church in its salad days, from its energy and excitement and urgency for truth and transformation; from their elemental approach to community that was based on sharing and learning and growing and having fun together.

But we found we had a few lessons for them, too. Like how it takes more than a sparkly moment of conversion to mature into a disciple, never mind how hard it is over time even to *agree* about stuff, never mind to *share* it. We could tell them a thing or two about how much vitality and urgency gets lost when the church stops getting oppressed, when the state is no longer the common enemy, when religion goes mainstream.

From our place in our pluralistic world today, we might even have a word or two to tell them about how the corporate benefits of holding doctrine a little more loosely. How learning to trust God sometimes includes honoring different ways of understanding God. How radical hospitality sometimes includes welcoming people *wherever* they are on their spiritual journey.

After the early church, we turned our attention to the 4th century Desert Mothers and Fathers of northern Egypt, who withdrew from mainstream life in order to recapture the core, the roots, the grounding, of their faith. Entered then the practice of what became known as the “*white* martyrdom” — the setting aside all worldly concerns and responsibilities in order to dedicate one’s life to loving God with all one’s heart, soul, strength, and mind, and the development of a life of prayer. If the early church were all about Passionate Worship, the Desert Fathers and Mothers were all about Intentional Faith Development. Only how to do that while juggling all the responsibilities of family and work and a tanking economy was a little less clear.

Shifting from the 4th century to the 6th, the 19th and the 21st century manifestations of the Iona community in Scotland, we were introduced to “thin places,” locales where, in Celtic lore, the veil between heaven and earth is especially porous, allowing for a virtually effortless sense of connection to the Holy.² The island of Iona has always been regarded as such a place by Celtic spirituality, from the time when the Irish monk Columba set foot on its shore in 563 C.E. And perhaps before.

Deeply rooted in its understanding of the Incarnation, the fleshly life, of Jesus Christ, Celtic Christianity taught us that that God is to be discovered, enjoyed. “The Celtic approach to God,” noted Celtic scholar Esther de Waal, “opens up a world in which nothing is too common to be exalted and nothing is so exalted that it cannot be made common.”³ Despite suffering, deprivation, exile, Celtic Christians learned to find the light in the darkness, yielding principles of a disciplined life balanced by periods of intense solitude, active political engagement, and identification with those who suffer oppression. Thanks to George MacLeod’s radical clinical pastoral education experiment in 1938, to this day the Iona community still “attempts to marry the work of peace-making and political engagement with the practice of prayer.”

From Iona we jumped to the Beguines, a spontaneous 12th century movement of northern European uncloistered religious women who aimed to live a life of prayer and service to the needy. Amidst the tumult and profligacy of medieval Europe, women and men alike were drawn to the *vita apostolica*, the apostolic life, the hallmarks of which were poverty, humility, charity, and a simple life lived in community. The Beguine communities provided a particularly attractive alternative lifestyle for unmarried or widowed women, of which there were many during this era of the Crusades. However, while the

² <http://www.markdroberts.com/htmlfiles/resources/thinplaces.htm>

³ <http://www.celticpilgrimage.org/esther.htm>

Beguines succeeded both in forming vital communities and in doing much good work for the poor, the uncloistered, read “unrestrained,” “uncontrolled,” nature, of their independent enclaves were deeply threatening to the highly ordered Catholic church of the time. In addition, their industry impinged on the commerce of local guilds. But it was when the Beguines started criticizing church authorities that they found themselves declared heretics, and their associations, dissolved.

From the 14th century, we leapt to the 21st again when I spoke to you of the spiritual rest, guidance and good food offered by my personal retreat center, Green Bough House of Prayer, located in middle Georgia. And once we got to the 21st century, we stayed there a while, hearing testimonies about the roots and works of The Open Door Community here in Atlanta, the worship and music of the Taize Community in France, the budding hopes and aspirations of the new L’Arche community for the mentally disabled in Decatur, and finally, last week, the weird and wonderful, odd and otherly world of the locally founded Second Life Gospel Church of Koinonia.

During the exploration of this somewhat peculiar continuum of Christian communities over the ages and across the world, my hope has been that we at EPC are beginning to discover our own place in it. For surely, over the infinite span of God’s redemptive history, we, too, comprise a sacred community as we schlep along the same path of discipleship, guided by the same Light of Christ, doing our darndest to respond to the same Great Commission all these other communities were making a stab at satisfying.

The question for me has been, so where along this time-honored spectrum of communal efforts to embody *Radical* hospitality, *Passionate* worship, *Intentional* faith development, *Risk-taking* mission, and *Extravagant* generosity, do we here at 1886 N.

Decatur Rd fit? And, perhaps equally importantly, where would we *like* to fit? Or, perhaps more to the point, where would *God* like us to fit?

It pleases me to claim that, especially over the last four years, the leadership of this church has persistently organized our focus, efforts, work and prayer around precisely these priorities. We may be small, we may be struggling, but by God, like so many of the communities we explored over this series, we've been getting increasingly clear about what we're up to here at Emory Church. As occasionally demented followers of that crazy reforming Jew, Jesus, we are discovering more and more what and how we are, what and how we're meant to be. And when we forget, we've got a mission statement, a vision statement, an identity statement and a bleedin' covenant to get us back on track.

Do we always stay on track? Of course not. Do all our various God-given if self-scribbled orienting statements need some fine-tuning? Sure, they do. They always will.

But fundamentally we know at this church that our primary task is to make of ourselves and all God's children subscribers of the love, forgiveness and restoration we know through Jesus Christ, not by becoming something we're not, but by growing fully into who we are, individually and as a community. Who and how we are, not just when we're in "pious" mode, but every ordinary day, through all the ins and outs and ups and downs of our shared lives.

You don't have to tell me how frail and flawed are many of our efforts, but by golly, we keep making them. Indeed, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given us to do so. May God continue to bless and magnify both the discovery of the good news, and the sharing of it, of this sacred community known as Emory Presbyterian Church.

To the glory of God. Amen.