Sunday, September 4, 2005
THE BELOVED COMMUNITY
Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus had high hopes for the emerging community of his followers, which eventually became the early church. He wanted those who followed his example and teachings to become "The Beloved Community." The scripture reading from the 18th chapter of Matthew's gospel for today demonstrates this. The chapter begins with his disciples asking him, "Who is the greatest in God's community?" They thought surely he would name one or more of them. However, in answer to that question, he called a child to him and said, and I'm paraphrasing, "You have to become humble like this little child. She does not judge people by rank, not even think of asking the question 'Who is the greatest in God's community.' Thus whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in God's community." He was reminding them that you cannot be a vital participant in God's community if you are worrying about who is the greatest.

Then, a little later in the 18th chapter of Matthew, he tells his followers that in his beloved community, people are to take care of each other, especially those who are down and out, those who are discriminated against and treated unjustly, those who suffer through no fault of their own. Take care of such people, even those you dislike.

He gives some examples of how his followers in the beloved community are to settle disputes among them. He ends this discussion with the revealing statement, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." In other words, "When you treat people with love and acceptance in the same way as I have treated you, then you will continue to experience my loving presence."

René Descartes, the French philosopher, is remembered for his statement, "I think, therefore I am." Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, was fond of saying a Bantu word, "ubuntu," which can best be translated, "I belong, therefore I am." I had a basketball coach in high school who said over and over again, "Any five players acting as a unit are superior to another five players acting independently." Or to put it differently, "I belong to the team; therefore I am." In other words, you discover your true self in relationship to other human beings. You cannot discover your true self all by yourself. No one is an island. That's what Jesus was saying with his statement, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Jesus insisted that God intends for all of us to live in beloved communities where we take care of each other and that God's will and our humanity are diminished anytime and anywhere human beings are treated as less than human. The opposite is also true. When you live in harmony with others, when you help others in need, when you love God and neighbor, then their humanity and your humanity are enhanced. It is then that you experience the presence of God. He hoped the congregations of his followers would be the models for these kinds of beloved communities. That, of course, is exactly the way he lived. It's also what got him into trouble with the religious authorities of his day. He accepted people that others thought should be unacceptable.

What does that mean more explicitly in today's world? In July 1995, Chicago was wrapped in a deadly heat wave. For days the mercury hovered in the high 90s. During that period, 739 Chicagoans died of heat-related causes.

Emergency teams reported finding inadequate or nonexistent ventilation in the residences of the dead. Persons living with cardiac or pulmonary weaknesses were the most susceptible. Older people were especially vulnerable.

What most news stories failed to report was another deadly killer: the absence of community. The majority of people who died in the heat wave died alone. They had no one checking in on their attic apartments or windowless rooms. No family, friend, or neighbor showed up to discover the severity of their situation. They lived so anonymously that Cook County officials buried them in a mass grave.

On the positive side of the human community equation, I have been impressed as I have watched the news this past week with the response to the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. People are helping each other in every way possible. Government at the state and federal levels has been quick to respond. The Red Cross, Church World Service, and other disaster relief agencies are doing their best. Other countries are volunteering to help.

The absence or presence of community does not depend on a disaster. You can see the presence or lack of community in your neighborhood, your workplace, and in church congregations. The scarcity of a deep sense of community, even when there are no disasters, can wreak havoc below the surface of outwardly busy lives.

In his play The Rock, T.S. Eliot wrote, “What life have you if you have not life together?” Eliot’s drama demonstrates the power of receiving life and nurturing life within the context of relating to other human beings. In the play, Eliot wrote, “There is no life that is not in community.”

When people become aware of the limitations of their isolated lives, they long for something beyond themselves. Loneliness can be devastating. If you have been brought up in the Christian tradition, you commonly turn to the church and more specifically the local congregation, often with high expectations for experiencing what you cannot locate in your solitary life.

A primary purpose of the church, according to Jesus, is to love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Therefore, the church’s main business has everything to do with relationships, putting people in touch with each other and with God.

What then are some signs that a church is a beloved community? This is an important question because not all congregations are beloved communities. There may be a lot of social togetherness and friendliness may be abundant, but this is not the same as being a beloved community. Being present in the same space with other people for one hour on a Sunday morning is not the same as belonging to a community where your presence truly matters to others and their presence to you.

Here are some of the signs of a beloved community, the kind that Jesus envisioned. Outwardly, members of a congregation may have little in common with each other. Inwardly, they can be touched by the possibility that they have something to learn from each other.

Here’s the amazing fact about truly beloved communities: uniformity does not constitute biblical community. If anything, it threatens it. According to the story of Pentecost in the Bible, the early church was anything but uniform. It was widely diverse, comprised of all kinds and sorts of people.

Henri Nouwen defined a beloved community as “that place where the person you least want to live with always lives.” The German pastor Martin Niemoeller, who protested Hitler’s anti-Semitic measures and was eventually arrested and put in prison, said, “It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. God is not even the enemy of His enemies.”

Unfortunately, many individuals are busy surrounding themselves with only those people with whom they wish to live. Beloved communities form where people with a dizzying variety of backgrounds and experiences take an interest in the mystery and mess of each other’s lives. Beloved communities celebrate and value diversity. Beloved communities are welcoming to everyone. I like what one church sign said, “Welcome to this congregation. This is one church where you will not be told you are a miserable sinner.” Another church announcement read: “The only prerequisite for receiving communion in this church is that you be hungry.” That’s exactly the invitation Jesus gave to the meal with him.

I believe that this congregation, First-Plymouth Church, is this kind of community. Of course, it is not perfect; it is always under construction. A truly beloved community in any age is something into which people must live as they walk into the future. Or as A.A. reminds its members, you are never a “recovered” alcoholic; you are always “recovering.”

A.A. traditionally describes this “recovering” process in 12 steps. Here’s my list of 7 steps for congregations and individuals as we work together in becoming the kind of beloved community Jesus had in mind.

1. We admit that we cannot live by ourselves. God has created us for community. We experience the love of God most powerfully in our love and care for one another. We remember the words from the Bible, “If anyone says he or she loves God and hates another human being, that person is a liar.”

2. We decide to turn our lives over to God and to be as open as possible to receiving God’s Spirit and love in our lives as we unconditionally practice love for others, especially those who are different from us.

3. We continue to acknowledge that in the Christian tradition, we understand the nature and love of God through the teachings and example of Jesus Christ and choose to become his followers.

4. In following Jesus, we increasingly experience the creation as being in harmony, and God’s creation as being good. In so doing, in the same way as Jesus, we become more and more accepting of persons who appear to be different from us. We see diversity as one of God’s gifts.

5. We begin to have a special concern for the poor, the outcasts, those in prison, and others who are unloved and forgotten.

6. As our relationship with our sisters and brothers in the human race and with all of creation continues, our intimacy with God deepens.

7. As our experience of God and our relationship with others continues to expand, we are learning that the meaning of life is not to be found in the accumulation of wealth, power, prestige, or fame. The result is that our lives continue to become more joyful.

How can you begin and continue to put these 7 steps into your daily life so as to help create and participate in the kind of beloved community Jesus had in mind? Here's one suggestion from C.S. Lewis:

"The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as you do this, you find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you love someone, you will presently come to love that person. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking that person more. If you do that person a good turn, you will find yourself disliking that person less. There is indeed one exception. If you do him or her a good turn, not to please God and obey the law of charity, but to show that person what a fine forgiving individual you are, and to put him or her in your debt, and then sit down and wait for gratitude, you will probably be disappointed. People are not fools. They have a very quick eye for anything like that. But if, however, you do good to another self, just because it is a self, made like you by God and desiring its own happiness as you desire yours, you shall have learned to love it a little more, or at least to dislike it less." Amen.