

SERMON: “Making Room in Our Hearts for Authentic Community.” (Matt 19:16-26; Acts 5:1-11)

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross, Sunday, February 12, 2012. St. James Presbyterian Church

This week marks the end of Epiphany – and the end of our Making Room in our Hearts series in which we looked at how, as people of faith – as Christians – we are compelled to show our love for God by loving our neighbours, and how we are called to do this by living in community. We started by being reminded that we are created in God’s image (the Trinity) to live in community, and then how Jesus came to be-with us (Emmanuel – God-with us). We heard how this simple plan – the “Be-with” plan – was initiated by the creation of a small community – a small group – in which Jesus was able to “be-with” His disciples as they, in turn, could “be-with” Him as they learned to love God by loving those that God wanted them to love – their neighbours: and how Jesus commissioned them to become God’s community – His Body, the Church – in the world so that they/we can do what He did (WWJD?) by “be(ing)-with” those who are in need of the presence of God in their lives. We heard then how we are to use our spiritual gifts to build up community; first by encouraging our sisters and brothers to enter into a relationship with God, then through hospitality how we are to welcome one another into community, and then – as we heard last week – how we are to “go the distance” in our love for our neighbours.

It has been a challenging series as we have been looking at what to live out our faith individually, and what it is that we as a community of faith are called to do as we seek to manifest the connection between loving God and loving one another. It has been an challenging series – but that’s been intentional: as you know by now we will be launching a major pastoral care initiative over the next few months that see us form several regionally based small groups – that will meet in your neighbourhood, will be hosted by one of your neighbours, and will, hopefully – given time **and commitment** – become the Church in microcosm right where you live. As we have heard, building up relationships – and, by extension, building community – takes intentional, deliberate, conscious work: it requires us to make choices – to choose either to or not to reach out; to enter into a relationship or to turn away from belonging in community with others. Again, this is challenging stuff; but that’s because it speaks directly to who we are as Christians and what we claim to believe: and, as we roll out the GRACE Groups, we have the same choice that was laid out to the People of Israel in Deuteronomy 30:11-20.

In that passage from Deuteronomy we find the basis of the covenant of our faith: choose God – choose to live a life of faith, choose to obey God’s laws and commands – and by choosing to be faithful, live; or choose other gods – choose to turn away from God to follow/chase lesser things, money, fame, material possessions, choose to disobey God – and by doing so, die. The story of our salvation – of how we were chosen by God, how we were set apart for salvation – depends on our choosing to respond not just once, but by changing the direction of our lives: but this choice must be whole-hearted, complete, and unreserved. It is a truism: you get out what you put into something. It doesn’t matter

what it is the more of yourself you invest into it, the more rewarding and satisfying it is. God knows this. That's why He makes it clear what the consequences are: God wants us to commit ourselves to Him – to give Him all 100% of ourselves – so that in choosing life the life that you live will be the one that God wants you to live: so that you might enjoy the rewards that complete faith and trust in, and reliance upon, God can bring. But true faith requires our full devotion – there can be no distractions: if we want all that God offers then we must offer all of ourselves – anything less won't do. And this is where our two readings come in.

The Matthew reading of the rich young man – which is wonderfully illustrated on the bulletin cover – is an exchange made between Jesus and someone who is asking about God's laws or kingdom: in this case a man who by all definitions has a choice to make. When asked "*what good deed must I do to have eternal life?*" Jesus responds by reciting several of the Ten Commandments – specifically those that have to do with loving one's neighbours; then He adds "*you shall love your neighbour as yourself.*" The rich young man professes to having accomplished these so he persists. Then Jesus tells him, "*If you wish to be perfect [that is completely right with God], go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*" This is where the choice comes in. What Jesus is telling him is that it's not enough to love your neighbour – or to do what one has to to get along – one must trust the Lord with all your heart, all of your soul, and all of mind: and to do this – to love God fully, to be "perfect" in faith – you cannot hold on to the things that divide your allegiance, that also lay claim on your life, that tempt and entice and ensnare us and lead us astray. The choice is clear – and the choice is his: choose faith and live (and life here is meaningfully expressed in community) or choose to be possessed by his possessions and die (as symbolized by his turning away from the community toward isolation.)

The Acts reading – in case the point hasn't already been made clear – drives it home: we live and die by our choices. As dramatic as the reading is, don't let their deaths distract you: like the rich young man in the Matthew reading, it is what's happening inside Ananias' and Saphira's hearts that is the focus of the reading; it was their choice – their withholding from God, from their neighbours – that led to their death. This passage comes right after the account of Barnabas giving the proceeds from the sale of his land in Acts 4 – an act that resulted in him being given the name "Barnabas" for his encouragement and generosity. Now we have no way of knowing whether Ananias and Saphira witnessed Barnabas' act, but it appears that they – at least superficially – sought to follow his example. Sadly, for some reason – maybe because they lacked faith, or their trust wavered, their hearts were uncommitted, their loyalties were divided – they decided to hold back and gave less-than their whole heart: and in doing so not only were they dishonest to their neighbours but they attempted to deceive God. But God can't be deceived and He swiftly fulfills His covenant by giving them the death they chose.

This reading has clear implications for us as a community: as we seek to build up the Body of Christ – as we hope to make room in our hearts for authentic community – the greatest threats to our success will come from within; they will be internal not external. Clearly, just as with Ananias and Saphira – and the rich young man – what is inside us – what our choices are – puts our community at risk. As we move forward – as a community of faith – the choice is clear – and stark: we can live out our love for God by loving our neighbours in an authentic community filled with love, faith, and life; or we can hold back and not commit to the building up of our neighbours and make the choice to die as a community. The story of Ananias and Saphria ends with how the Acts 2 Church chose to respond: the text tells us that “*great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.*”(Acts 5:11) This is the first time in the New Testament the word “*Church*” – ecclesia – is used. They were now an authentic community; they were now a “*Church!*” And if we will make room in our hearts for doing the hard work of building up authentic community, we too will be the Church God wants us to be. As we end this series we each have a choice to make: it is my hope/prayer that over the next few months that you/we will choose to live life as God created you/us to.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts move us to respond to make room in our hearts for our neighbours – to love God by loving others. Amen.