

## **Stewards of the mercy of God**

Romans 12:9-21

August 28, 2011

You did it! You came! And I am so proud of you!

I'm talking about last Sunday morning, the first Church Row Neighborhood Coalition Prayer Walk. You responded to Laurie's invitation. You listened to my plea not to consider it a Sunday off, but an opportunity to do something important, to show our solidarity with our Christian brothers and sisters on Church Row. You came.

I was so happy and proud as I looked around the sanctuary of St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox church and saw so many of you! You asked questions. You were interested and engaged. You were there.

The Greenes and the Thorpes and the Stevensons and the Hatingers were there. The Brocks and the Rickerts and the Panicuccis and the Holts and the Hans were there. Craig and Laurie and Ken and Dave and Gordon and Jacquelyn and Maggie and David and Mike and Donna and Donnie and Connie and Celeste and Tristan and Brittney and Erin and Cody were there. And Jack and Sam and Japhy and Maddie and Zoey were there! We were there: older adults and younger adults, youth and young children. I was proud!

So, what did you think? You don't need to answer now. I have already talked with several of you about your impressions of that morning. There were certainly many things that could have been done better. That's almost always true the first time you try something new.

The food did not quite meet advertised expectations.

There was nothing specially prepared for children, but I believe our congregation was the only one that brought children along.

The spiritual leaders of each congregation were either not present or not introduced.

There was no element of worship, of coming together as Christians to offer common worship in each of the worship spaces.

And I'm not sure the level of participation of the other church row churches approached our level of participation, though overall attendance was good.

There is room for improvement, but we did it, and doing it matters. We sat in the sanctuaries of three different churches, three very different churches from three very different Christian traditions, and we learned something new about each of them.

I especially enjoyed the visit to St. Demetrios. The church sits directly across the street, but in my seventeen years here in Waterloo, I had never been inside its doors. We learned there of the special importance of many different sacred objects for worship in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. There were the candles holders at the back of the church and the many icons representing Christ and various saints decorating the walls of the sanctuary on every side. There was the special chair reserved for the archbishop's visits. There was the spoon used to ladle the communion wine into the mouths of parishioners, and the carved wooden funeral box paraded on Good Friday.

We walked from St. Demetrios to the First United Methodist Church, a church much like our own. Both churches were founded shortly after the founding of the town itself and have had members serving prominent roles in community life throughout the town's history. Both churches feature large organs and stained glass windows.

Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church was our final stop and we heard of their passion about their worship space. It is indeed a most spacious and grand and awe-inspiring sanctuary. We heard too of their work with various ethnic groups in Waterloo, most recently with folks from Burma moving here to take jobs at Tyson Foods.

You may not realize it, and I don't imagine it was intentional, but the three churches we visited on this first prayer walk represent the three major divisions of the modern Christian church: Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant. If you know something of church history, you will know that the single Christian church was divided into two churches -- Catholic and Orthodox, west and east, Roman and Greek, in 1054 AD. The various Protestant movements split from the Roman Catholic Church in the 14, 15, and 1600's. Two of these, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, are relatively homogeneous churches with a centralized authority, while the other is a very fragmented church with many different faces and many different expressions.

When I look at the church now, the church as a whole, the church I saw Sunday morning in its three primary manifestations, I see a rich church, rich in its diverse traditions, rich in passion and devotion and service, a church in its various forms full of good people, faithful people, caring people, witness people, servant people. The strength of the church is indeed its people, its

dedicated people. But I saw too a church that is broken, a church broken into pieces, a church divided against itself.

Jesus prayed that all those who would believe in him would be one, but we are not. We are not, not because we are not all members of a single church, but because we do not yet as different churches fully recognize and affirm and respect each other. We do not come together as one family in Christ. You and I would be denied communion at two of the three churches we visited last Sunday. How can we be family if we can't even eat together?

That's why I commend you. You come from a tradition that is doing its best to make Jesus' prayer come true, a tradition that does not make a priority of institutional preservation but obedience to the gospel, a church that cares less about the name on the door than the quality of our practice as followers of Jesus. That's what we preach, and last Sunday morning you proved that we practice what we preach!

So what do we do? How do we continue to do our part to fulfill Jesus' prayer, to break down the walls that still divide Christ into little pieces? As important as the big ecumenical efforts are -- Churches Uniting in Christ, the Formula of Agreement, the World Council of Churches -- real change will happen, not from the top down, but from the bottom up. We seen ample evidence of that kind of transformation in the rapidly changing political landscape of the Arab world. Christian unity will not come from what church councils do, but from what church people do. Christian unity will not be achieved by theological consensus, but by love.

By love that is completely sincere! Not just words. but words and actions. Not just for show, but for real. Not just to prove we are good people, but to be good people. Not just when it comes easy, but even when it comes hard. Love must be completely sincere!

And what does sincere love look like? Paul elaborates that very well in Romans 12 with words that need no further explanation.

*Hate what is evil and hold on to what is good.*

*Show respect for one another.*

*Work hard.*

*Serve the Lord with a heart full of devotion.*

*Share your belongings. Open your homes.*

*Bless those who make trouble for you ...*

Paul talks about hating evil, but not about hating evil people, because love that is sincere shares the same concern for everyone, love that is sincere is not proud but humble, love that is sincere repays evil with good. Do everything on your part to live in peace with everybody.

It will be our love, our sincere love, for each other -- for Orthodox Christian sisters and Roman Catholic Christian brothers, for Pentecostal Christian sisters and high church Christian brothers -- it will be our sincere love for each other that will make exclusion and separation no longer acceptable.

It will be our readiness to step outside our comfort zones, to lay aside our own beloved traditions, to really see and hear and feel through another Christian's eyes and ears and hands, even to break the rules when the rules should be broken, that will finally permit the fulfillment of Jesus' desire that all his followers be one. What we did last Sunday was just the tiniest of steps, but it was a step in the right direction.

But I have told you only half the story, actually much, much less than half the story! I have told you a story from Romans 12, but another story has been told in great detail and with great passion in the first eleven chapters of this letter.

That story is quite simply the story of the mercy of God. It is that story that allows Paul to begin chapter 12 this way:

*So then, my friends, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship you should offer.*

The gospel story, the story of all of human history, is the story, the ongoing and still unfinished story, of the mercy of God! We are the beneficiaries of the mercy of God, all of us! We live and move and have our being because of the mercy of God! Our past is healed, our future is assured, and our present is rich with possibility, all because of the mercy of God!

And so we are called to be -- nothing more and nothing less -- than stewards of the mercy of God. The richness of the mercy God has shared with us, we are called to share with each other.

*Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful ...*

*Because of God's great mercy to us, offer yourselves ...*

Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice. As a living sacrifice ... As a sacrifice ...

Sacrifice. That's where the rubber hits the road, isn't it? That's when love proves its sincerity ... in sacrifice.

And that is just what is so often lacking in contemporary efforts to bring churches and Christians together ... sacrifice. We want to get along. We want to be nice to each other. We proclaim a desire for Christian unity, but we are not ready to make sacrifices to achieve it.

That's why I am proud of you. We made a sacrifice. We cancelled our own worship service for the sake of something bigger than us, for the sake of the church of Jesus Christ that is bigger than our church, bigger than any of our churches.

A couple of years ago our ministers group was discussing options for our West Fourth Churches ecumenical Thanksgiving service. We were considering the pros and cons of a service on Thanksgiving eve or on the preceding Sunday evening. I suggested we hold the service on Sunday morning, gathering all of us into one of our sanctuaries to give God thanks together. Well ... Our churches are not ready to give up their own Sunday morning worship times.

But that's what it will take to really bring the people of God together and empower us to work together as Christ's body in this world! Christian unity will never happen as long as we try to do it in ways that are easy and painless, in ways that cost us nothing and allow us to hang on to everything we want to hang on to. And the world will see nothing of the life-changing love of Jesus in us if we are always taking the easy way out and choosing paths that benefit only ourselves.

We are stewards of the mercy of God. Because of God's great mercy, we are called to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice. Love must be completely sincere.

Let's do it!