

Church Shopping

6/12/05

Today we sang “I Am the Church.” While the song sums up pretty well some of our basic beliefs, it is a bit simpler rendering than the understanding presented to us in the Old Testament. There, as we heard read earlier from “Exodus,” the covenant between God and the people of Israel comes as the result of God’s involvement in the lives of the people. Because God acted – delivering the people from the Egyptian army as if on eagle’s wings – these people are now most surely the “treasured possession” of God. Indeed, God claims them as “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” I see the word “church” written all over that characterization! And, of course, the people offer allegiance to God as their spiritual leader. Words that are professed faithfully even if they are to fall far short of their goal: “Everything that the Lord has spoken we will now do.”

One thing that strikes me, as I read from the Old Testament especially, is that the Hebrew Church (or the religious community) is either already implicit as a way of life or spelled out as a God-given invitation. Very different than what we have today, a society in which people shop around for the “church offering the best fit.” Isn’t it true...that when our friends and acquaintances discover we are attending a church, they ask “well Ralph, what exactly attracted you to that church in Wakefield?” They by-pass the possibility that God could have called us to that place, as a primary condition of faithful church going. Rather they infer that we must be attending because we sing in the choir, enjoy a little mental stimulation or can retain some sanity by leaving our children in a nursery downstairs and out of the way for an hour. I have been in ministry over half my life now and I am not sure what people assume when they ask those questions – “Why are you going to

church? What brought you there?” But seldom do they suggest that God has called us out of covenantal love.

Not that these questions are insignificant. In fact, we do ultimately end up in a particular church for a variety of reasons. Good food at coffee hour, uplifting music, the quality of the preaching, the oversight of the children, social activities that fit our needs. I have to assume that for most of us, a particular faith initially influenced to come that first day. However, when church shopping we should never overlook the intangibles.

So let's begin with how friendly people are on Sunday morning. You cannot necessarily win with this one. I have heard newcomers say they welcomed the attention of so many friendly people and I have heard them say they were just so overwhelmed that they couldn't come back. People have different expectations when they come to church! Yet, I feel it's far better to err by being hospitable than not. Christine Pol, in her book Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian tradition, reminds us that “we pay attention to the people we value.” If we neglect to greet people warmly at church and welcome them back, we make a statement about whether we want them to return. Jean Vanier wrote, “To invite others to live with us is a sign that we have a treasure of truth and a peace to share.” People come to church generally as strangers; do they leave services thinking that we want them to be our friends?

What newcomers notice on a first Sunday at a church is not only the welcome of the greeters and the ushers. It goes deeper. I have sat in churches where no one spoke to me save for the greeters and the ushers. Being out of the ministry during a sabbatical, sitting in different churches as an unknown, was a humbling experience. I did gauge churches by how many came over to see who Linda and I were and if they could answer any questions for us. I could sometimes

tell if they did this by training or naturally, but in either case it didn't matter. If a church talks about the invitation of Jesus to be at the fellowship table together, then welcome is a most important characteristic of the church. My sense is that many of you came here and returned here because of the sincere welcome you were offered by others.

Secondly, the minister of the church is important. Again, I don't know how important. I like to think fairly important because I am a pastor. But I also prefer to think that people support a church in spite of a minister. In any case, a minister can attract or deter interested newcomers, just as a minister can open the longtime member to feelings of endearment or aggravation. The minister is generally the one who presents the theology of the particular church. I have never pushed an inclusive language agenda on a church, but generally my language is not male centered, even in reference to God. However, one Sunday a couple came to church after being away, having visited one or more other churches in that time. "Boy," I remember the wife say "was the difference in language something! It was so obvious to us We are glad to be home."

A minister, in what he or she says or in how he or she says it, paints a picture. Some like the picture; others don't. The wording that is used tends to convey how we look at God. The language the minister uses is what many first come in contact with. For better or for worse, some return; others want no more of it. Most important, I like to think, is whether the Minister allows people the freedom to see God through our own lens or does the minister believe there is only one clear cut way of understanding (or language), capable of describing God?

Of course, it may not be this complicated. Some people just return the second week because the minister told a good joke in church and the sermon was under 12 minutes.

What is more complicated and usually determines ultimately if people stay is whether they can be involved. “Does the church really need me?” “I have some real gifts; does this church want me to take part in its ministry.” One reason Linda and I volunteer at the Preble Street Teen Center in Portland is that the Volunteer Coordinator did all the right things. I called and he called back. I showed interest and he invited me for a tour. At the end he laid out volunteer possibilities. When I said that interested us, he said “When can you start?” Linda and I began serving supper on Friday evenings. For several weeks, he happened to stop by to see how things were going.

Without using a religious language, the Coordinator made it clear that all teens were welcome at the Center. It was not our job to judge them; just in our own small way to ensure that they felt safe. That they felt welcomed! The language was different but the point was the same one Jesus made – everyone is welcome at the table. One of the Greek philosophers once wrote, “In what does the nature of justice consist, than in affording to strangers through kindness that which we render to our own relatives through affection.” (St. Lactantius)

How we issue the invitation to serve is so important. Does the church need us? Does the church really want us? How can we too be bearers of God’s justice and welcome to others?

I want to end with a joke. Maybe you will come back if it’s good. You have to realize that many people come to try out a church after a move from a different location. The Jones family was leaving Alabama for New Hampshire due to a job change. As the last items were going on the moving van, Mr. and Mrs. Jones saw their young daughter in the yard looking around and talking. They overheard her say, with tears in her eyes, “Goodbye House, I hate to leave you but we’re moving

to New Hampshire.” “Goodbye trees, we’re moving to New Hampshire.”

“Goodbye grass,” she said as she looked down “I’ve enjoyed playing on you, but we’re moving to New Hampshire.” This went on a while until finally she looked up and said, “Well, goodbye God,...we’re moving to New Hampshire.”

In Exodus, God says to Moses that I am God, “the whole earth is mine.” God didn’t add, I don’t think, “except for in New Hampshire.” God’s church is everywhere and for all who want to take part. Let’s hope as people move here and come to this church for the first time, that we provide evidence of God’s welcome to all. Of God’s desire to have us serve faithfully in ways of justice and peace!

I am the church, you are the church, and we are the church together! Amen