

Where's Our Steeple October 26, 2008

A couple of years after The Garden began, we were asked to host a gathering of United Methodist pastors from around the Indianapolis metropolitan area, and part of the purpose was to expose these pastors to a different way of being "church." As you might guess, this gathering met with mixed reviews, but one pastor's question, which was really a comment, probably sums it up best.

Noting that we didn't have a cross in evidence, or a Bible enshrined anywhere in view, or any of the other symbols often associated with a church building, he made a comment about the reflecting ball that hangs above us for use in a Beef and Boards production. In a rather cynical tone, he observed that we apparently thought this ball was a suitable substitute for the "real" symbols, and he insinuated that we were not a legitimate faith community because we didn't have all the symbols he believed to be necessary. Although he didn't say anything about it, I suspect he thought there was no way we were real when he first drove up, just because we didn't have a steeple, like any real respectable church would have!

Clearly, he and I had different perspectives on what it means to be the church, and why we come together as a faith community. He seemed to feel that it was all about the building and its accoutrements, and probably the traditional hymns and other trappings found in more typical settings. As you might guess, I was not in the same place, and I'm probably farther away from that place now than I was then!

As I thought back to that experience, it caused me to reflect once again on why we get together on a weekly basis, and what the purpose of our gatherings is all about. What does it mean to be a community of people who are striving to be faithful? Do we have to have a certain kind of facility in order to be real? Do we have to have all the normal symbols of the faith in order for our worship to be worthwhile? Why are we here?

First, I have to say that I don't believe it has anything at all to do with the steeple we have or not, nor with the symbols, or even the space in which we meet. Certainly, we enjoy and appreciate the opportunity to be here at Beef and Boards and at Oak Hill, but if those spaces were to disappear tomorrow that would not mean The Garden would go out of existence.

That's because a church is always more than a building or edifice or symbol. The church is every one of us. We are the church. In fact, I remember working with Vacation Church School one time when the kids learned this little song: "I am the church; you are the church; we are the church together. All around the nation, all around the world...yes, we're the church together." It's a pretty simple song, but it holds the basic truth that it's people like you and me who are the church.

Given all that, why are we here? I'm certain we can find plenty of other things to do, but we're here. That's not true of everyone we know. I doubt that there's a single one of us here this morning that isn't acquainted with someone who does not attend church, and sees no value in doing so. In fact, in the state of Indiana, more than ½ of our population is not church-going.

The reasons for that vary. Some say church doesn't seem to have anything to do with what they're going through. Others report that their experiences are so boring that it turns out to be a waste of time. Some have had some rather negative experiences with church, sharing that they have not been welcomed, or have felt judged, or felt as though they weren't good enough to be there. The list of reasons could go on and on.

On the flip side of that, why do we go to church? Why are we here this morning? For some, it's a time to get re-centered and renewed. For others, it's an attempt to find answers to questions or dilemmas. Some are looking for a sense of peace, or a little something to offer some hope and encouragement. Yet others are experiencing a sense of emptiness, and seek to find some reason for being.

When we stop to think about it, my guess is that it's all those things and more, all intertwined together to the point that they become inseparable. But let me ask you a question: Why are you here today? Why did you get up, leave the comfort of your own home and come here? Why are you here? Why am I?

I certainly can't speak for every church gathering, but if we were to try to describe the purpose of this church, The Garden, I don't know any better way to do it than by going to our mission. We say: **"The Garden seeks to engage all in the quest to know and share the unconditional love of God."** What do we mean by that?

It probably works best if we break it down into more manageable sections. We begin by using the word "engage," and that word was intentionally chosen. One of the questions and/or comments we often receive from other church folks who visit is "Why don't you all sing? Nobody participates, except those up front."

That's a valid question, because we don't do organized group singing, although I certainly see some of you singing along with familiar songs, and I know I do. However, our point is not that folks "participate" by singing or standing and reciting one thing or another. That's why we use that word, "engage," because to me, it implies something deeper than the word "participate" does.

It seems to me that engagement really goes to the depths of our being—sort of a spirit-to-spirit, or soul-to-soul connection. What we hope, and attempt to create a climate for, is that the real you and the real me have a positive encounter and experience with one another, and that, somehow, in that encounter, we also encounter and experience the ultimate source of loving goodness, God. I don't know if that makes sense or not, but it's the closest I can come to explaining what our intent is each week.

To take this a step further, please notice that we say “to engage all.” By that, we mean that everyone is welcome here. There are no hard and fast rules we have to follow, and no hoops that we must jump through before entering these doors. The doors really are wide open for those of all faith traditions, or none, for those from all walks of life, for those who know what they believe, and for those who don’t have a clue. This experience is for all of us.

Again, to go back to our statement of purpose, we say “to engage all in the quest.” To me, a quest is about the seeking, the journey, and I really believe that’s what life and faith are all about. Most of us don’t have all the answers to either faith or life, and we’re searching and learning and growing, and backing up and starting over, and that’s OK. In fact, I’m reasonably sure that that’s what it’s all about. I can tell you one thing for sure, and you’ve heard me say it before, my faith is far different today than it was when I was a teenager or a young adult, and if I live long enough, I’m pretty certain it will be different 20-30 years from now! That’s part of the beauty of life and faith—we never reach the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but we’re forever on the quest to experience more and grow more.

Given all that, what are we searching for and wanting to experience when we go to church? At The Garden, we state that we’re here “to know and share the unconditional love of God.” My hunch is that we all want, in one way or another, to know that God is real, and that in some mysterious way, God has something to do with us. Maybe we’re hungry for love, unconditional love, and wonder what that would be like to really feel loved fully and completely? So, I think part of the reason we come together is the hope that in some way, we will experience, “know” that love. And our hope is that we might get a hint of it here, enough of a hint that we can be assured that God is with us wherever we are, wherever we go.

But there’s another part to that statement: Not only do we want to know God’s love for ourselves, but when we know it, we can’t help but want to share it. In other words, God’s love, when it really fills our hearts, is so big that we can’t keep ourselves from sharing it with others. Now I’m not talking about the “brother are you saved?” thing. I’m talking about all the ways in which we demonstrate our love for ALL our brothers and sisters.

Author Brian McLaren, who will be leading a workshop at St. Luke’s on November 1, talked about the need we have to share God’s love in one of his first books, *A New Kind of Christian*. He wrote: “The church exists to equip its members for the benefit of the world.”

In other words, we’re here to know God’s love for ourselves and to share it in such a way that it makes the world a better place for all of us, not just for me, not just for some of us, but for all of us. And I wonder if that doesn’t work more along the lines that a Daniel Poling described, when he said, “The place of the church is not to change society, but to change men and women who will then do the changing of society.”

You see, when we are changed by God’s love, we live and act differently, and that means that we make

change waves wherever we go. Some may be radical waves, and some just little ripples, but we can’t really experience God’s love and keep it to ourselves. It makes a difference in us, and because we’re different, more loving, we touch lives and make a difference in the world around us.

That’s what our Bible passage is saying. The writer is Paul and he’s writing this letter to the church in Rome, saying: “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you. Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going to work, and walking around life,—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God.” (TEV—“This is the true worship that you should offer.”)

We’re here to worship God with our very lives, with everything we say and do. Sometimes we just need our weekly “fix” to get us back on track and to start again living our lives that shows God’s love. At least, I think that’s why I’m here. How about you?

Closing:

Writer Anne Lamott, in her book *Traveling Mercies*, explains why she finds church important for herself and her son. She writes: “The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by.” We all need a path and a little light, and as we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that we can see the light, and be a light for others.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.