

THE THIRD JEWEL OF CHRISTIANITY

(05/17/2020)

Scripture Lesson: Mark 3:13-19; 6:6-13

“He went up the mountain and called to him those whom he wanted, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons.” (Mark 3:13-15)

Today is the fifth Sunday after Easter (the sixth Sunday of the Easter season). It is also the tenth Sunday that, because of the restrictions on public gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic, we have not been able to meet as the gathered church for Sunday morning worship.

BTW, if you would like to hear the audio version of these sermons, you may have to wait a few weeks because I can only handle so much technological change at one time. It is challenging enough to use Zoom for therapy sessions and Jung Institute meetings, and to put together this email list. Being able to record a sermon on my phone and then send it to David Crane to post on our web site is a challenge. However, one advantage of the audio version is that I read the entire scripture lesson in it. This could prove helpful to those of you who do not own a Bible or who, for some unknown reason, may have misplaced it.

I hope we all know that even though we have not been able to meet in our sanctuary for worship and our vestry for coffee hour refreshments and fellowship, we are still the church. We never stop being the church. Even if we were being persecuted by a government that sought to outlaw religion, a government that was threatened by its citizens' allegiance to any power greater than itself, even if we were driven underground and had to meet in secret, we would still be the church.

Although we know this to be true, we still miss being together for worship, fellowship, education, and spiritual growth. Our collective life, our life together is important to us. I know it is to me. I hope we never lose a sense of the importance of being the gathered church, of being together with and for each other, of being an integral part of a special community of faith. And so, we wait, patiently and with an abundance of caution, for the time when we can once again be together in person.

I have met people who, upon learning that I am a Christian minister, inform me that they are Christian, but they do not hold membership in any particular church. In fact, they rarely set foot within a church. They say this in a sort of defiant tone. I'm not sure how they want or expect me to respond.

The gospel lesson that we just heard or read speaks to the importance of Christian community.

Every fall, on Re-Covenanting Sunday, we renew our covenant with God, with each other, and with our church. We promise that, as a community of faith, we will not only care *about* each other; we will care *for* each other. We promise to reach out to those in need through our missions. We promise to utilize the resources provided by this church to grow spiritually in the year to come.

There are two aspects of what it means to be a Christian. The individual or introverted dimension of our faith has to do with our own personal relationship with God through Christ. In the last analysis, it makes little difference what box we check off for church membership; we either have a deep personal relationship with God, or we do not. This aspect of our religion assures us that “I am the church; you are the church.” Each and every one of us is the church, that is, if we define the church as the point of intersection between this world, the world of space-time, and the kingdom of God, the realm of eternity.

The point of intersection between the two realms, which is a sacred space, is not confined to church sanctuaries; it is within us. Augustine suggested that God was like a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. If God’s center is everywhere, then the center of God is in you, in me, in everyone. And there is no outer boundary to God. God’s realm extends throughout the universe. No one is excluded. There is no place where God is not.

The second dimension is the extraverted or communal dimension. We attest to this when we proclaim that “we are the church together,” or when we meet in worship as “the gathered church.” We speak of being nurtured by this community of faith, and we affirm that we are called to be both disciples of our Lord and also apostles, bearers of the Good News to a darkened and broken world.

You will probably not be surprised to learn that I have found a parallel to this Christian teaching in Buddhist spirituality. Buddhism teaches that there are Three Jewels; three precious dimensions to our spiritual life. Because they are three places where we can take refuge from the storms of life, they are also called the Three Refuges.

The first jewel or refuge in Buddhism is the Buddha, the enlightened one, the incarnation of wisdom and compassion. The second jewel is the dharma, the teaching of the Buddha and the teachings of Buddhist masters over the past 2,500 years. The third jewel is the sangha. This is

the community of believers, of practitioners. Buddhism, which I generally think of as an introverted, meditative, inner-focused religion, tells us that the sangha is of ultimate importance.

The Three Jewels of Buddhism have their counterpart in Christianity. As Christians, our first jewel is Jesus Christ. He is the “treasure hidden in the field.” We take refuge in him. Our second jewel is the scriptures, the Bible, and the teachings of the church, the unfolding and evolving testimony to what Jesus taught, what he did, and who he was. That is our dharma. The third, our sangha, is the church, the community of believers, the community of faith. These are the Three Jewels of Christianity.

I find it interesting that in all the cases of domestic terrorism in our country, the shootings or bombings in schools, churches, movie theaters, college campuses, and public gatherings, the perpetrators were invariably loners. They were either not in community or they were members of on-line communities, which, to my way of thinking, is not really community. If they were members of a community, it was invariably a hate-filled community. To a person, they were untouched by an experience of healthy, nurturing, sustaining community (even in their families of origin and in their schools), the sense of belonging, of being accepted for who they were, of being loved. They often lacked or lost a sense of meaning in life, which is why something else, something twisted, moved in to fill the vacuum.

I believe that community is an integral part of our identity, our sense of self. I will be coming back to this in a few weeks as I reflect on two of the books that I have read during my pandemic retreat: *Lost Connections* by Johann Hari (which is about the importance of connections), and *Solitude* by Anthony Storr (which is about the value of solitude). Both authors make the point that no form of punishment breaks a prisoner down quicker than solitary confinement. Because we are essentially (though, according to Storr, not entirely) social beings, when we are separated from the community of other human beings, we lose our bearings. Unfortunately, the daily or ordinary life of many people is similar to solitary confinement. They have few interactions with other people. These people have little to no experience of genuine community, even within their family. We experience this to some extent because of the shelter-in-place restrictions.

Most of us don't experience the sense of community in our neighborhoods that I did when I was a child. I know the names of some of the people who live on my street, but I don't know any of them personally, and they know little to nothing about me. I don't know the names

of the people who live two houses away from me. Then again, I'm an introvert. Because families relocate an average of once every five or six years, they don't have the time to set down roots in a town. It is hardly surprising, then, that many of them don't set down roots in a church.

Community, the third jewel, the third refuge, is important. It is an important dimension (but not all) of our personal identity. It is an integral part of the fabric of our society. It is the glue that holds us together. When this sense of community dissolves, when people no longer feel connected with their brothers and sisters, the nation falls apart.

I think we are seeing that in America today. Far too many people do not feel connected with our society, our culture, especially those of certain racial, ethnic, or other minority groups who have suffered from prejudice and discrimination. Far too many people feel disenfranchised because they lack the educational or technical tools to build a successful life for themselves and their family, to "make it" in our society.

Although Jesus was basically an itinerant preacher, community was important to him. At the beginning of his ministry, as our scripture lesson attests, Jesus forms a community. It is one of the very first things he does. He calls twelve disciples to whom he entrusts his message. He tells them how they should be in community, that they should share what they have, that they should not compete for positions of honor, and that they should be quick to forgive one another. Jesus also challenges us to extend our sense of community to everyone. He calls us to build a fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.

The apostle Paul took this dimension of Jesus' teaching and applied it to the churches that he founded and pastored. Paul understood the individual dimension of the Christian message, the importance of one's personal faith. Paul also knew that it is difficult to deepen one's faith in isolation. He taught us that the church is the mystical body of Christ, and that we, as Christ's hands and feet, are empowered to carry out Christ's work in the world. Paul was devoted to founding, strengthening, and serving little churches like ours because he knew how important they were to the faith of individual Christians and to the transformation of the world.

I know you probably get tired of my saying this, but we have something special here in this church, something worth saving, something worth preserving, a quality of community that we can share with the world. The mega-churches, because of their vast resources, can offer so much more than we, so many excellent programs, but they often lack a sense of community. Many medium-sized churches are struggling because they can't offer the dynamic worship

experience of the large churches, but they still don't have a sense of genuine community. I think of us as a niche church. I believe there is a place for a church like ours.

This is the first church I have ever served where every single person knows every single person. We not only know each other's names; we know each other. We care about each other. In the words of our beloved hymn:

*We share each other's woes,
Each other's burden's bear.
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.*

We pray for each other. We forgive each other when our little idiosyncrasies annoy (we do, don't we?). We thank God for the manifold gifts that so many of our members share.

When we meditate in a sangha, surrounded by others who are meditating, the experience of being in community strengthens our practice. This is also true of the Christian church. When we worship together or meet together in a study group, we draw strength from each other. We learn more about God, Jesus, and ourselves. We recharge our batteries. We are encouraged and strengthened to walk the Christian walk. We deepen our faith.

I believe there is an additional extraverted dimension to the Christian sangha. This is the dimension of mission. Jesus tells us that it is not just about us. He didn't call the twelve together as a community just to strengthen their faith. He sent them out to the world as evangelists, as bearers of the good news of the gospel. He gave them authority over the malign and demonic powers that would shatter individuals and community. He gave them the power to heal people of their diseases. A core dimension of our church is our mission outreach. Without this, we would not really be a Christian church.

Once we get this idea of this, we will realize that we can create church anywhere. Some time ago, I read about a cruise ship that foundered (unrelated to the pandemic) for several weeks without power. To say that the passengers had an unpleasant experience would be an understatement. They went for days living with little food and water, and they had to sleep on the deck because there were no lights in their cabins. I'm sure that tempers grew short. This was not anyone's idea of a vacation cruise.

However, within a few days, the passengers began to form community. They shared the little food they were able to obtain with children and the elderly. They formed little support groups. The passengers then turned to scripture for comfort and guidance. They began to

conduct Bible study groups. They tried to be there for each other. I think there is a lesson in this for us as we journey through the stormy seas, as we suffer the deprivations, the anxiety, the fear visited on us by this pandemic.

I think I know why you are a member or friend of our church. I think I know why you do the many things you do for our church. I think it is because you grasp the importance of the community of faith that was brought into being by past generations, the community of faith that we nurture and sustain in the present, the community of faith whose future we will help to unfold.

I think that, deep down, we realize that the church, that our little church, is not only the “Third Jewel,” it is also the “Third Refuge” of our lives, our refuge from the storms of life. And it is indeed a precious jewel. Perhaps it is even the “pearl of great price” of which Jesus spoke. If so, it is a jewel that we are called to share with a world that desperately needs it.

A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson

The First Community Church of Southborough

www.firstcommunitychurch.com

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