

THE THIRD JEWEL

(08/14/2022)

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)

Well, we made it through last Sunday! We met for worship at 10:00 instead of 11:00 a.m., with only one total newcomer showing up at the old time, and we returned to the hallowed tradition of a coffee hour following the worship service. By setting up the coffee and pastries near the kitchen door, we made it easy for those who wanted to have their coffee and socialize outside to do so, and those who preferred to sit down at a table in the vestry to do so as well. Those who were comfortable with neither could simply pick up a coffee and pastry to go. I was happy that my worst fears, the possibility of fights and name calling, never came to pass!

I am, of course, kidding! Though only a little! The past 2 ½ years have been difficult for us as individuals, as a society, and as a church. We have had to make a lot of individual decisions regarding what we feel comfortable doing and what we don't. We have had to factor in the matter of age, medical vulnerabilities, and our living situations in addition to our confusion or lack of trust in the words of guidance we received from various sources. As you know, Darlene and I, because of our age, my collapsed lung, and our commitment to help care for our grandson Miles, who has just turned two, and our granddaughter Emerson, who is eight weeks old, have been on the extremely cautious end of the spectrum. We have not been inside a restaurant since the pandemic began, and we go into stores (masked) only when we have no other option. The only time we are with a group of even 10-20 people is when we are here for Sunday morning worship—and we wear masks there except when I am leading worship.

The resumption of our coffee hour, which has been held following worship for the past 157 years (except during this pandemic, the Spanish flu, and for a brief period at the end of the Civil War) has been a central part of our fellowship. It provides us with an opportunity to be with each other, not to conduct church business, but just to be with each other. It keeps me humble to remember that if the worship service goes 5 minutes “over” people start pointing at their watches, while if the coffee hour goes even 30-45 minutes “over” people don't complain!

I hope we know that even though we have not been able to meet in our sanctuary for worship and our vestry for refreshments and fellowship for extended periods over the past 2½ years, 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 feel a loss during those times when we cannot be 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 unfolding next steps in our return to normal.

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, which is held on the first Sunday in October, the anniversary of my call to serve as Pastor of this church, 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 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. By the way, I like this definition.

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 our Lord

calls us to be both disciples and apostles, bearers of the Good News to a darkened, hurting, suffering, 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 or refuge is the dharma, the teaching of the Buddha and the teachings of Buddhist masters over the past 2,500 years. The third jewel or refuge 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 great importance to our spiritual journey.

The Three Jewels of Buddhism have their counterpart in Christianity. As Christians, our first jewel is Jesus Christ. He is not only the historical Jesus of Nazareth; he is the “pearl of great price,” the “treasure hidden in the field,” the spirit of Christ within. We take refuge in him. Our second jewel is our scriptures, the Bible, the teachings of the church, the writings of theologians throughout the ages, the unfolding and evolving testimony to what Jesus did, what he taught, 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 the cases of domestic terrorism in our country, the shootings or bombings in schools, churches, synagogues, movie theaters, college campuses, and public gatherings, the perpetrators were invariably loners. These men (and they were all men) 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, these men were untouched by an experience of the kind of healthy, nurturing, sustaining community that gave them a sense of belonging, of being accepted for who they were, of being loved. They often lacked a sense of meaning in life, which is why something else, something twisted, something evil moved in to fill the vacuum. They built their lives on something other than the rock that Jesus tells us should be the foundation of our identity and our life.

I believe that community is an integral part of our identity, our sense of self. This insight has been reinforced by my pandemic reading of two books: *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. They have little to no experience of genuine community, even within their family. We all experienced this to some extent because of the mandated and chosen pandemic restrictions. One of the powerful insights that I have had during this pandemic is how much more difficult it has been for people who are living alone, especially those who are single and/or have no family relationships or interactions to fill the emptiness. I know we said at the beginning of the pandemic that “We are all in this together!” It simply isn’t true!

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 now 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 and Christian 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 all their brothers and sisters, the nation falls apart. It devolves into small tribal identities where people connect only with “their own kind” and are threatened by people who are not of “their own kind.”

We are seeing that in America today. Far too many people do not feel connected with our society, our culture, with America as a whole, and they have reason to feel this way, especially members 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. Then there are the people who see an evolving, diverse, heterogeneous America as the enemy, and who seek to bring it back to the mythical white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, evangelical, heterosexual nation that God intended and still intends it to be. This would be silly were there not so many people who believe it!

Although Jesus was basically an itinerant preacher, community was important to him. At the beginning of his ministry, as our scripture passage 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. He tells them 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 then challenges them (and 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 little 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 entertainment offerings 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.*

In this church, 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.

If you were to meditate in a sangha, surrounded by others who are meditating, the experience of being in community would strengthen your 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 that, compared to Buddhism, 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 sicken or destroy 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!

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 Jesus, beginning with his disciples, and you grasp the importance of this community of faith, a community that we nurture and sustain in the present, a community of faith whose future we will help to unfold.

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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