

Opening Worship
Thursday, June 4 2009
Bishop Julius Calvin Trimble

No Longer A Stranger

Dottie had been a member of the church for nearly ten years, before she could say, "***I am no longer a stranger***". I wondered how commonplace her experience was.

We experience life through a pattern of relationship rituals. These rituals are different for each of us (Church attendance, family meals, etc.).

Christmas and Thanksgiving are big family holidays. For my family, there are rituals that usually include food, faith, fun...I suppose faith comes first, because we all faithfully expect there will be food in abundance.....There is a new found strength when you are able to claim a place in the community, where you are no longer a stranger.

One of our rituals over the past 25 years has been Annual Conference, where we began as quasi strangers.....I looked forward to it....Most recently, my wife and I, always meeting new people each year.

The 166th Session of the Iowa Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church is gathered for Holy Conferencing that we may worship God in spirit and truth; give thanks for the goodness of God; and account for the work that is before us.

We are all children of the most high God. Holy, holy, all the saints adore thee.....God in three persons blessed trinity.

Paul says in the gaining and losing that is part of life, there is nothing surpassing the value of knowing Christ Jesus.

Phillipians 3:10 *"I want to know Christ , and the power of his resurrection".....*

Sharing of his sufferings....This is not all figured out and formulated, so as all will shout simultaneously.... But Paul is clear when he says, "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own."

I confess like Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, my imagination has often been too poor and stingy.

"God is greater than my imagination, wiser than my wisdom, more dazzling than the universe, as present as the air I breathe and yes, utterly beyond my control. She says, "That is in short, what makes her a Christian. As the creature of a God like that, we need a mediator, an advocate, a flesh and blood handle on the inscrutable mystery that gives birth to everything that is. Jesus is himself full of mystery. Yet, he is enough like us to convince me that relationship with God is not only possible, but deeply desired by God, who wants us to believe that love is the wide-net spread beneath the most dangerous of our days."

This relationship with God is enriched because of relationships with others! A song I learned a year ago, **"I need you. You need me. We are all a part of God's family!"**

Heat wave....why people died in Chicago one hot week of summer. In 1995, July 12-16th over 600 people died due to recorded breaking heat that summer. In Chicago, the day time temps ranged from 100-106 degrees.

Mostly elderly, living alone, disconnected from church and family or without family or mobility....strangers though surrounded by hundreds...thousands of neighbors.

Stranger: "Newcomer, not known by others... Root word
Strange: *Peculiar unusual, extraordinary.....*

Exodus 23:9 Courtesy to foreigners, "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien for you were aliens in the land of Egypt."

Hebrews 13:1-2 "Let Mutual Love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

Vs. 3 goes on to say, "remember those in prison as though you were in prison with them".

A. **Live up to our advertising**Open Doors, warmhearted, welcoming, 10,000 doors.....*Radical Hospitality & Extravagant Love.*

My mother-in-law used to tell her grandchildren as they left the house for school or church or play or on a date or for college.... "**Be Nice**".

She, also, stressed the importance of being REAL....If you can't be real, be niceBe real and kind....Be courteous.

Radical Hospitality calls for us to be authentic in our welcome and our willingness to change, be changed and weep with those who weep and shout with those who shout, pray with those who pray. Faith is accepting that we are accepted...Once we become Christians, we get to spend the rest of our lives trying to be one.

A story is told of a couple who was traveling around California in the late 1960's. The couple came upon a young man who seemed pleasant and content, sitting by a bridge near their hotel. Day after day they noticed him, sitting at the same spot. Finally becoming curious, they asked him

why he sat in that one spot all day, everyday. "I happen to believe in reincarnation. I believe that I have lived many times before and that I will have many lives following this one. So this life I'm sitting out". I don't know about you my friends.....But, I am not sitting this life out.

United Methodism is not a spectator sport.

- B. **Believe what you cannot see.** Leaders get to help people believe what they cannot see. *"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."* Hebrews 11:1.

Strangers are all around us. I believe God is gifting us this moment in history to practice what we read and what we advertise. God is gifting us, this moment, to build more bridges and fewer fences.

- I'll give you more people. You might have to move to live with them, learn anew language and realign your maintenance budget to invest in your ministry.
- I'll give you more people, you might have to redefine your parish boundaries, realign your district priorities. Think globally and act locally...
 - How about a growing senior population.
 - How about college communities where meaningful education will, hopefully, converge with meaningful vocation.

- C. The Psalmist says: "Come bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord. Who stand by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up you hands and bless the Lord....May the Lord Maker of Heaven and Earth Bless you from Zion..Psalm 134

Well, how do you like living in Iowa?

We are no longer strangers.

- When your Bishop comes present him.
- If my wife or conference leaders come, acknowledge them.
- We are part of you.
- And, we are not sitting this life out.

When I go to Hy-Vee or stop at Casey's or at the airport, I raise my voice slightly and call the sales clerk or cashier by name (nametags are good). I then proceed on most days to say something that will elicit a smile. I try to thank them, before they thank me. There are hundreds of encounters each day where people are hurting or angry or lonely. I never expect that somebody else will cheer them. Somebody is not happy and maybe, they have a right to feel that way. In Iowa, we plant corn, soybeans and oats. We have fertile soil and an open market for planting encouragement!

Studies have been done showing that leaders, including clergy, don't need encouragement to be faithful and attempt to do their best. When the question is framed, "When you get encouragement, does it help you perform at a higher level?", 98% of the respondents said yes, and 2% said no.

As we begin an important time together, lets us begin under the umbrella of God's Grace, Goodness of God's Mercy and the calling of Jesus Christ.

Let us take serious our call to radical Hospitality, Receiving Gods grace.

Leonard Sweet: "So Beautiful," Quotes a Navajo saying: "Always see your visitor as hungry, lonely and tired."

My Iowa family is very much like my Alabama and Tennessee family.

Something to eat, someplace to rest and someone to talk to.