

Why Church?

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
June 8, 2014 Pentecost & Confirmation Sunday

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21; 43-47

A reflection on church by UCC pastor, Matt Laney: “Remember back in elementary school when teams were being divided up and a few kids were always the last ones to get picked. But enough about me. In an episode of the television program, *The Wonder Years*, the main character, Kevin, complains to his gym teacher about this unfair and humiliating tradition of choosing up sides. The teacher responds by making Kevin a team captain. Kevin responds by picking all the un-athletic nerds for his basketball team. The other team responds by easily crushing Kevin’s team on the court.

“But at the end of the game, Kevin releases a shot which appears to be bound for glory, but instead hits the gym teacher while he is eating a sandwich. In Kevin’s words, ‘In that instant, basketball became fun again.’ ”

Pastor Laney goes on to speculate about the players Jesus chose for his team – the church. He could have chosen the powerful, the rich, the great spiritual athletes who prayed three times a day, knew their Bibles forward and backward and tithed. Instead, Jesus took some uneducated and smelly fishermen, a tax collector whom everyone knew was a crook, a doubter, a cynic and one with suspicious political connections. My goodness, he even reached out to women – something unheard of in the first century! And amazingly, it continues. With all the choices he could make, Jesus chooses us, even us, in all of our strength and weakness, faithfulness and uncertainty.

I think of the words of the children’s hymn: “I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.” For better or worse, when we are wonderful, when we fall far short of who we are called to be, still... “I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.” Still Jesus calls us and intends to use us for his great purposes, just as we are, warts and all. I take a lot of comfort in that.

I am deeply moved by the decision of four of our youth to become members of this church today. In truth, I am deeply moved when anyone makes the decision to become a church member. It is not a decision that exactly gets a lot of cultural support in this part of the world. My guess is that our kids do not know a lot of kids who go to church. Many, perhaps most, of your friends, seldom if ever go to church. Whenever someone learns that I am a minister, the phrase I hear so often that it has begun to sound like a Sonoma County mantra is... “Oh, I’m spiritual but not religious.” More often than not, what it means is that you will never see me in your church on Sunday. Who needs the institutional church? It is intolerant, stuffy, arrogant, narrow-minded, mean-spirited, asks for money all the time and is boring. Sometimes it seems that people cannot wait to tell me their story of how the church once wounded them or a member of their family, and they tell it as if it happened yesterday. Church people are all a bunch of “holier than thou” hypocrites.

Am I over-stating things, being just a bit defensive? Me? Perhaps a bit, but I really have heard all this and more. And let’s be honest, many of these criticisms are justified. Sadly, over the years the church has wounded, excluded and scarred a large number of people. When it comes to Sonoma County’s perception of church, we have some work to do. We have to let people know that we, like those first disciples, are often lost and confused and seeking just like anyone else... far from perfect. And we also have to be clear that the Jesus we follow is like an open door to a welcoming table, not a hammer for beating people over the head and judging them.

The other day I met with a gay couple, together now eight years, to talk about their desire to get married. They came to me because they know Darryl, who told them to call me – he is now serving as my agent! But they also came to me because they went to our church website, read our mission statement about inclusiveness, and knew this might be the place for

them, a place for those who have so often found themselves excluded. I sure hope that is what we are, or at least trying to be.

I think of a story told by Anne Lamott in her recent book, *Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair*. She talks about a huge and devastating fire along the Marin Coast in 1996. 12,000 acres of pristine wilderness and nearly fifty homes burned. It was discovered that the fire started from a campfire illegally built by four teenage boys camping in the wilderness. When they left in the morning, they covered the fire with dirt and thought it was extinguished. It wasn't, and the result was massive destruction. Lamott talks about the heroism of the firefighters, the community's round-the-clock effort to save whatever could be saved, and the generosity and compassion of people coming together to help wherever they could.

Then she turns to the four teenagers. She writes, "The boys who had accidentally started the fire turned themselves in early on, with their parents beside them. How do you jiggle a miracle out of rage, ghastliness, terror, ash, grief and teenage boys?"

"A firefighter had written a letter to the local paper about how carefully the boys had tried to put out the fire. Though they had extinguished the flames, embers were still burning underground. They hadn't known this could be a fire danger and they left. After that letter, even as townspeople continued to share their loss and pain, they also told stories of their worst teenage mistakes and transgressions.

"We rarely think our way out of these tight, dark places", says Lamott. "Sometimes as a community, though, we take an action together, and somehow something gives...."

"So a picnic was held to honor the firefighters. The whole town turned out. The president of the fire board gave a speech, but at the end he digressed from what you might have expected him to say. He talked about how, in ancient times, people who did damage to a town were sent to live outside its walls, beyond the pale, beyond community, beyond inclusion and protection. He mentioned the four young men who had started the fire. He had heard that their families were considering moving away. He thought the town should make it clear to the families that they should stay, that they were wanted, that they were needed.

"There was sustained applause. People whose houses had burned down said they agreed with him. The town wanted these young men inside the pale, inside the ring of protection. In the words of the firefighter who had written the letter to the paper, 'So what seems to me to be happening in this community, which has just fought so hard to save itself from holocaust, is that we have turned, almost without missing a beat, to try to save the future of four young men.'"

That's church the way it ought to be. That is what I hope our four confirmands have seen as they have participated in and observed our life together. That is what I want the community to know about this place. Yes, what we believe is important, financial support of our shared ministry is important, taking care of our property is important, Sunday music is important, mission trips are important, making coffee and ushering on Sunday morning are important, irrigation and landscaping are important. Lately we have discovered that getting along with the Sonoma County Assessor's office is very important. (now there is a class never taught in seminary!) But what is really important, is caring for each other as that devastated town cared for those four teenagers, going from the Tower of Babel to a sharing and caring community; person meeting person and hand reaching out to hand in an accepting, inclusive, loving and forgiving network of caring; a network, a community, where we reach out to comfort, support and heal - loving the world, loving each other, as Christ has loved us. That is what matters; that is what lasts. May it be said of this church in Sebastopol what was said of the early church in Jerusalem... "See how they love each other."