

NURTURE EACH OTHER

Today, I will conclude my sermon series on our newly adopted mission statement, which states that, as a congregation, we will “share God’s love, embrace our neighbors, nurture each other.” I want to focus this morning on what it means to “nurture each other.” The following story gets us headed in the right direction!

Michael Lindvall shares this story about Tina Cory, who was a young, unwed mother in his Presbyterian congregation. The Sunday before Christmas she came to church to have her son baptized. She walked up to the baptismal font all by herself, and bravely stood before the gathered crowd. Her mother, Mildred Cory, was sitting in the front pew. As he always did, Lindvall asked the question: “Who stands with this child?” Mildred slowly stood up – seeming hesitant and awkward on her feet. Prepared to go on with the service, Lindvall glanced down at his book. And just as he was about to ask the parents’ question to Tina, he heard movement in the pews. Suddenly old Angus, a patriarch and elder of the community stood up – and then his wife, Minnie, next to him. Then two other leaders stood up and then the sixth grade Sunday School teacher. Then a young couple stood up in the back pew. And soon everyone in the church was standing up for little Jimmy. Lindvall writes: “The unexpectedness of this departure from the routine quieted us all, even little Jimmy. The water touched his forehead, and rolled back into the thin wisps of baby hair, down the bridge of his nose, and onto his cheek. Every eye was on the child, who was, for a moment, everybody’s baby.” (told by Susan R. Andrews, *Lectionary Homiletics*, June 2002, pages 15-16)

I share that story because it vividly portrays what Christian nurture looks like in the life of the Church. We can only imagine how difficult it was for Tina Cory, who was a young, unwed mother, to present her son, Jimmy, for the Sacrament of Baptism. Of course, Mildred, the baby’s grandmother, was standing close by to give her love and support in more ways than one. And, the minister of Word and Sacrament was there to officiate and administer the means of grace through the sacrament. But, when the congregation stood - one-by-one, in pairs, and then together as a whole congregation of God’s people – it was quite evident that Christian nurture was taking place. Even before the question was asked of the congregation - “Do you, the members of this congregation, promise to tell this new disciple the good news of the gospel, to help him/her know all that Christ commands, and, by your fellowship, to strengthen his/her family ties with the household of God?” – their vow was already being lived out!

One of the ways the dictionary defines nurture is to say that it is the act or process of raising or promoting the development of; training, educating, fostering, etc. I especially like what the thesaurus offers in the way of synonyms for the word nurture: care for, cherish. Our mission statement calls for us to cherish each other!

I was reminded of a statement I read many years ago when I studied church history in seminary. We were reading Henry Chadwick’s book on *The Early Church* when I came upon this statement: “The practical application of charity was probably the most potent single cause of Christian success. The pagan comment ‘See how these Christians love one another’ was not irony. Christian charity expressed itself in care for the poor, the widows and orphans, in visits to brethren in prison or condemned to the living death of labour in the mines, and in social action in time of calamity like famine, earthquake, pestilence, or war...” “Hospitality to travelers was an especially important act of charity” (page 56).” When we nurture each other, we cherish each other; and, that genuine affection is expressed through charitable actions to one and all. “See how these Christians love each other!”

The motivation behind our desire to care about and for each other is certainly found within the Scripture passage read earlier (as well as in many other places throughout the Bible!). The church at Corinth, to whom the Apostle Paul wrote, was a very troubled congregation. There were many factions within the fellowship, and the people spent a great deal of time quarreling about various matters or

ignoring other items of importance. Thus, the Apostle Paul wrote to these Corinthian Christians and he reminded them that it was the grace of God that has been given to them in Christ Jesus.

In other words, their shared fellowship, their being called together to share the life of faith, was a gift from God (“by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”) and that sacred gift wasn’t to be treated so lightly or frivolously. Furthermore, God in Christ had enriched and strengthened this church; after all, they were not lacking in any spiritual gifts. The Corinthian church had every necessary spiritual gift in order to build up the fellowship and extend Christ’s mission and ministry further into the world. Therefore, the Apostle exhorted the Corinthians to live in Christ, and that especially means to love and care for each other. What the Apostle Paul said to the Christians at Corinth applies to every Christian congregation throughout the ages; and, our own church is certainly no exception to the rule. We are called to nurture each other, to cherish each other, to see and serve each other as God sees us and has blessed us. And, in order to be a church that witnesses to Jesus Christ and carries on his ministry in and for the world, we need everyone and their spiritual gifts in order to function at full capacity. We too are called to demonstrate Christian unity and support for each other. May it also be said of us: “See how these Christians love one another!”

I would like to take a personal moment and share with you how I recently experienced nurture within this congregation. In meeting with some members of the congregation, I was given feedback that my sermons were not received well both because they were read and they were not relevant to what’s taking place in our community and in our world. At first, it didn’t feel like support; it felt like more criticism coming my way.

My initial reactions were anger and frustration. After all, I had been taught and to preach this way over thirty-years ago, and I felt that that training had served me well in my previous three congregations. We were instructed to have a carefully constructed manuscript to take into the pulpit, and to say exactly what we wanted to convey. We were not to use any old words but precise words, which were well thought out and chosen deliberately for the preaching event. A lot of thought, study, writing and revising went in to each sermon in order to get it right. Thus, initially, I was hurt by the feedback. I shared these frustrations with Monica, who has been my wife for almost thirty-four years and my soul mate for an even longer period of time. Monica allowed me the opportunity to vent; but then she offered me the vantage point of looking at the positive side. She said that perhaps the feedback was offered in love and that this was an opportunity to learn from what was shared and to try and grow in a new way of preaching. The message, the Word of God, was the same from age to age, but how it was presented perhaps needed to change to speak to a different generation of believers.

In my heart, I knew Monica was right (again!) and that what she said was true. Even more, I know the people who offered me that feedback on my sermons weren’t out to get me; they care for me and want to challenge me to grow and do better. As I thought about this, I came to realize that they had courageously spoken the truth in love to me.

So, here I am – after thirty-two-plus years, I’m trying to learn a new and different way of preaching the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, to my flock. I will never be able to memorize everything I want to say; and, I won’t promise that I will never read a part of my sermon ever again. But, I will try to look you in the eyes more and converse with you and share my convictions. And, if during the sermon, I stutter or use poor grammar or have a slip of the tongue, I trust that, after the initial wince, you will be both understanding and forgiving. Furthermore, I trust that we will nurture each other.

This is what I will bring to the table of our shared fellowship along with whatever spiritual gift the Lord has given me. As we live within a covenant community of believers, I wonder and look forward to the spiritual gifts that you will share as well. I expect that whatever is said and done within our church’s fellowship, whenever we gather and for whatever reasons, will be offered in love and in order to nurture each other. Our mutual support of each other is evidence that godly love is practiced here!

Today marks the first of four Sundays within the season of Advent. We live in this in-between-

time as we remember and celebrate Jesus Christ's first entry into the world, in human flesh, at Bethlehem; and, we wait for that future time when our Lord Jesus will come again. Yet, in the meantime, we also acknowledge how Christ comes to us again and again – in the least of these who are members of his family (as we heard last week); where two or three are gathered in his name, he promises to be in our midst; at Table, where he serves as Host and invites us to come and sup with him and each other; and in many other visitations. While we hope for Christ to come again, I think Christ also hopes that we will be present in his name for one another – to love and nurture and cherish and serve each other with our various spiritual gifts and Christian compassion.

I have used this story before but it bears repeating. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead was a pastor in City Temple in London during World War II. He once told about the time he visited the family of a man who had just been killed in an air raid. The man's wife, who was in her twenties, was sitting on the floor crying. Her head was in her mother-in-law's lap; she was also crying. The young woman turned to Dr. Weatherhead, not really in anger or belligerence, although both responses would have been understood, but just out of her pain, and asked, "Dr. Weatherhead, where is God now? What is God doing?" Dr. Weatherhead responded, "God is sitting there with you, helping to comfort you. God is in the hands of this woman who loves you. God is in her heart, expressing her love to you and in your heart, expressing your love to her. That is one of the things God is doing. God, right now, is using people to help people." (told by Dr. Barry Bailey, A Picture of God, pages 94-95)

Let us also be one of the ways that God is expressing divine love through us to each other. Let us nurture each other, cherish each other, share our joys and bear each other's burdens, serve and support each other – all to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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