

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

A Bridge of Restoration

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56
Ephesians 2: 11-22

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“...he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”

Prayer: Holy God, may we experience your will and desire as we worship you, as we hear your word, and as we proclaim your faithfulness. Amen.

Not long ago I heard that there are a few major companies and corporations that have specific re-entry programs for ex-convicts and ex-felons. This means that these companies deliberately have policies which welcome job applicants who are coming out of prison, trying to do them a service by incorporating them back into society, helping them get back on their feet, and get re-established. So, I went to the Internet to find out which companies do this. Turns out, Goodwill Industries is leading the pack with the specific re-entry program they have. “Through programs focusing on workforce training, housing assistance, substance abuse, and health/mental health issues, local Goodwill agencies help create new opportunities for former offenders returning to the community” (<http://www.goodwill.org/page/guest/about/publicpolicypriorities/exoffenderprogram>, retrieved July 18, 2009).

Another company called Titan Tube Fabricators, a metal plant in St. Louis, posts job ads in halfway houses and hires former convicts for welding or similar jobs. Company President Chuck Mill says that ex-offenders “make very good employees. We feel we offer them a good

opportunity, and that makes us feel good, too.” (Armour, Stephanie, <http://www.usatoday.com/careers/news/newsusa3.htm>, retrieved July 18, 2009).

And, in Cleveland, Ohio, a program called The Care Teams “is part of the Community Re-entry program (CR), administered in Cleveland by Lutheran Metro Ministry on behalf of six denominational offices—Episcopal, United Methodist, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, ELCA Lutheran and Missouri Synod Lutheran. (Richard E. Sering, “Reclamation through trust,” *Christian Century*, December 6, 2000, 1263 (http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?item_topic_id=2062, retrieved, July 18, 2009).

I’m sure there are other companies that do this, but the point is, in general, it is very difficult for ex-convicts to find jobs, even in the best of economies. Their criminal past often haunts them, their background check often tank their job application. It’s nice to know that some companies have opened their welcome mat to ex-felons as part of their hiring practices, helping to restore these people to societal acceptance with integrity. Dividing walls come down.

What an apt metaphor for what we heard about in today’s scripture readings! Jesus is inundated with people of all kinds wanting, needing his healing touch. These were the sick, the infirm, the unclean, the ostracized. These are the metaphorical ex-cons and ex-felons of Jesus’ day, the ones whose illness’ haunted them, the ones whose background checks revealed their uncleanness, the ones for whom it was thought they could not come close to God because they were unfit.

No matter...Jesus ministers to each of them regardless of illness, religious preference, or

past history. He opened God's welcome mat for every one. The people ate it up! So needed was God's healing power that when Jesus left one place, the throngs followed him and surrounded him when he stopped to rest. And, as he healed them, not only were their lives restored physically and emotionally, but they were also restored to a place of societal acceptance with integrity. That is huge! Christ, for them, was the bridge of restoration, and walls are broken down, no longer applicable.

A couple of decades after Jesus, Paul writes about the divisions are between Jewish and Gentile people...the ostracization of the Gentiles. Up until now, there were very clear, definitive lines... Gentiles were unclean, they had dietary practices that were un-kosher, they lived on the "other side" of the sea, and they were not "God's chosen people." They were uncircumcised, aliens from Israel and strangers to God's covenant, and they did not have any hope of a life with God... that is, until they encounter the word about the unifying bridge of restoration found in Jesus Christ.

Paul affirms that Christ is the one who restores relationship, he brought peace where there once was hostility. In Christ, both groups become one. He broke down the dividing walls and made everyone citizens, everyone as members of the household of God, which has as its foundation in Christ Jesus. Exclusivity gives way to inclusivity.

The Gentiles becoming a part of God's realm with God's benefits is kind of like an exclusive country club I know that only allowed its members and their guests to take advantage of the golf course, the pro shop, the valet service, the restaurant, etc. Other non-members were turned away unless they were a guest of someone who was a member. Sounds typical, yes? But, then

the country club was put up for sale, hopefully for a developer to build houses on the golf course. But, then the township decided to buy the country club. They decided to keep the golf course and give access of all the club's benefits to the public. All of a sudden, the exclusivity of 'members only' changed to the inclusivity of the general public. Dividing walls were broken down, and an inclusive, open welcome mat philosophy was adopted. In effect, all who desired the benefits of the country club were members of the club.

I believe this inclusive kind of thinking is the same kind of thinking that God invites us to practice in our lives. Each of us individually practicing inclusivity means letting Jesus be our role model. As he practiced inclusivity in relating to others without pretense or prejudice, we are to relate to others without pretense or prejudice as much as we can. As he greeted people with openness, aren't we to do this, too?

This past week while I was at the New Jersey shore, I had lots of opportunity to walk here and there and pass by lots of people. I found myself greeting people all the time as I passed by them, but I noticed I always greeted them first. I began to wonder... what if I did not greet people first, would they greet me? So, I tried a little experiment. I was disappointed... never once during my little experiment did I hear someone greet me first. Everyone I passed by were content to just walk by without so much as a word of greeting. What is wrong with that picture? Have we in our culture lost even the slightest degree of hospitality with strangers? Are we so caught up in our exclusive lives that we can't be even slightly inclusive with strangers? Can we not recognize that Christ is the bridge of restoration between us and humanity, between us and God?

As Jesus practiced inclusivity individually, he also practiced it in his ministry. This means that in the church we are to practice inclusivity, too, I think. Christ has “broken down the dividing wall” between all who come together in his name. This means that...

In the church there is no wall between rich and poor.

In the church there is no wall between those who sit on Church Council and those who sit in the pew.

In the church there is no wall between those who run the church office during the day and those who work on committee meetings at night.

In the church there is no wall between the youth group and the retirees breakfast group, between the church school teacher and the student chair of the Christian Education committee and the chair of the Parish Life Commission.

In the church there is no wall between the powerful and the powerless.

In the church there is no wall between the eloquent and the shy, ‘I’ll never-speak-in-front-of-people’ person.

In the church there is no wall between the well-educated and the illiterate, between homeless person and homebound person, between pastor and people.

In the church there is only one humanity, one body, one peace (adapted for Chapel Hill UCC, http://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=2665, retrieved July 18, 2009), and Christ is the bridge that restores and connects relationships with

all. In Christ, the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. Individually and as a church, we become a dwelling place for God.

The living spirit of Christ now lives in us and in who we are as Chapel Hill United Church of Christ. Can we actively live as an inclusive community? Can we faithfully practice our ministry in ways that tear down dividing walls?...In ways, that opens God's welcome mat? That lets the ostracized in? That restores relationship with each other?

Trusting in Jesus' Spirit in us and practicing his words and teachings that come to us through scripture will enable us to go on the way of God's path which leads people to work together for the common good. May God's faithfulness to us help us! Amen.