

Romans 12:3-5
Matthew 5:1-11
“Members of One Another”

February 2, 2020
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Whether we realize it or not, every week in church there are 3 stories being told. 3 stories that, at times, get their own moment at the microphone, but that, for the most part, actually get told all at once. It’s like a great river that has been filled by rain which fell in all 4 hemispheres, flowed out into the 5 oceans, and has now come to meet here. We have to look and listen closely to figure out how these stories have all arrived here together.

In no particular order, the first story that gets told here every Sunday is the story of us—of David, of Anne, of Mark, of us as individuals, of where we’ve been in the last week. We have not all been in the same places, working the same jobs, living with the same people, carrying around the same worries, or trying to live out the same dreams. We each have a story, an autobiography that we’ve been writing down all week long, and that we brought here with us today. The story of who we’ve become; we carried it in with us today, and depending upon how much room we feel it’s taking up in our head and heart will have a lot to do with our ability to hear the second story, which is also being told today.

The second story is God’s story. Like our story, it is part autobiography. Listen carefully on Sunday mornings and, after the scripture lessons have been read, you’ll hear, “This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.” This is God’s story. We may have been the ones to have written it down, we may be the storytellers, but the story itself belongs to God. And what does the story say? It says that for all eternity God has been with us on the side of love.

I think that’s a pretty good summary of the Bible story. From the first word of Genesis to the last word of Revelation, the Bible tells us that out of love for all creation, God came to us. Even when we did not welcome God, even when we polluted and destroyed the good earth God made for us, even when we chose to follow after other gods, even when we spit upon and crucified the very Son of God, God came to us, and God loved us. Still today, right now, God comes to us, and God loves us.

This is the story God wants to tell us in scripture, and it is the picture book God wants to show us here at the table. “This is the table of the Lord,” we proclaim. It is not our table. It is not those whom we would welcome that can eat from this table, but all those whom God welcomes. And who is that God welcomes? From God’s autobiography, Bella read it for us a moment ago: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed are the merciful, and the pure in heart, and the peacemakers, blessed are those who are reviled and put out for doing what is right in God’s eyes.”

It turns out that one does not need to have faith to be welcomed at God’s table; doubt can do. One does not have to bring their own fork and spoon to be welcomed at God’s table; an open hand can do. One does not have to be able-bodied or able-minded to be welcomed at God’s table; being poor in spirit can do. One does not even have to know who Jesus is to be welcomed at God’s table; one only needs to trust in the welcome of Jesus. As Frederick Buechner reminds us, “God is the comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of finding one lost sheep than out of ninety-nine other sheep who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place. God is the eccentric host who, when the country club crowd all turns out to have more important things to do than to do than come live it up with him, goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchen and charity wards and brings home a freak show.”¹

It turns out that to be welcomed at God’s table, one only needs to welcome those whom God would welcome.

In the church, we have a word for this kind of radical hospitality at the table. We call it sacrament—mystery, celebration—sacrament, the body of Christ given for you and you and you and you that no one should be left out, for here is the kingdom of God! We call it a mystery

¹ *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy, and Fairy Tale*. 1977. New York, NY: HarperOne Publishing, p. 66.

because it makes no earthly sense that God would love us all so equally and graciously. We call it a celebration because God does.

Scripture and sacrament—God’s story that together make up the second story we hear every Sunday. Which brings us to the third story we hear every Sunday—the story of those who came before us, who first gave the money to put up the walls, whose vision and leadership brought the idea of Four Corners Community Chapel to life. In so many ways, we would not be here without them. Their story has become ours.

In my office, I have a large closet that houses all the historical books and papers of our church, going all the way back to our founding in 1858 when a woman named Sarah Carpenter decided it was high time the children in this community had a Sunday School they could attend. She started out in a one room school house across the street where the CVS now sits, but very quickly, with the help of the Ladies Circle Society, she was able to raise \$2800 to build a small chapel on the opposite side of the street. That chapel is now my office at the far end of the hallway. Earliest documents from those days record that her vision for the Chapel was simple: “That children might learn to live the love of God.”

From 1858 until 1956, the church was named the Cumberland Universalist Parish. As a Universalist church, its hallmark belief was that no one, absolutely no one, could be separated from the saving love of God in life or in death. While Universalists do not contend there is no hell, or that it doesn’t matter how we live, they do contend that, in the end, the mercy of God wins out over everything.

When, in 1956, the church here in Cumberland joined with another Universalist church in Pawtucket, together they became Four Corners Community Chapel. 5 years later the Universalist Association in Rhode Island decided to join with the Unitarian Association to become the Unitarian Universalists. Owing to their essential belief in the redeeming work of God in the person of Jesus Christ—a belief not held by the Unitarian Universalists—the

congregation chose in 1961 to become part of the United Church of Christ, and wrote the following Covenant, a portion of which appears on the front cover of our worship bulletin each week: “We are a people called together by Christ our Lord, in this time and place: to worship, to learn, to witness, and to serve. We accept the responsibility for outreach in mission and social action that the cause of justice, peace, and righteousness may go forth. As members of one another, we take the concerns and needs, the joys and hopes of each to be our own.”

“As members of one another.”

There’s a lot being made lately about church membership, especially in mainline churches like ours, where membership is on the decline. You and I could probably talk all day about why this is. My friend Jeremy was fond of saying that he loved coming to church, but he’d never join one. “How can a community that has so much to say about being inclusive use such an exclusive sounding word like membership?” His point is well taken, though I’m not sure our problem is with the words we use, so much as it is with how we use them.

I will say that after reading all the church history books on my closet shelf, and after hearing that part of God’s story today about the blessedly poor in spirit, I really can’t find any theological basis for the idea of church membership anywhere.

On the one hand, the story of our ancestors is that of a people who wanted to build a church without any categories of membership, a church where we are members only of one another, where we are held together not by a common address or common walls, but by a common story, a common table, and a common welcome. On the other hand, every story needs dedicated writers, just as every church needs dedicated leadership.

If I was going to make a pitch for joining in membership here at Four Corners, it wouldn’t be so you can get to say you belonged where others did not. Everyone belongs here. It would not be

so you can get preferred treatment and pricing when it comes to your funeral. Around here we have the same price for everyone: free.

It would be because you want your chance to be on the Church Council, or to become a Trustee, or to work with the Deacons, because you, like Sarah Carpenter, want to see our children learn to live the love of God. It would be because you believe that while we can't all lead at the same time, we all can lead some of the time. And while we don't all have the same gifts to offer, we all have a gift to offer.

And most of all it would be so that in 5 or 10 or 50 years, when someone is reading through the history books and they say, "Did you read about those people up at the corner and how much they care for one another? I wonder who taught those people to care so well and for so long," you can say, "I did, I did, I taught the people to care." May it be so.