

June 7, 2015
Falcon Heights Church, UCC
Falcon Heights, MN

Second Sunday in Pentecost
Matthew 5:13-16
Romans 12:4-13

REFLECTIONS ON VALUING COMMUNITY

It's June....worship at an earlier hour! Finally, summer! We are inclined to kick back a bit; people come and go on weekends. Not much happening down at church. But on the contrary, your intrepid Discovery Team has decided to keep us working this summer, starting today. Which isn't really a bad thing, as the word *worship* actually means *the work of the people*. We don't come here to be entertained or even primarily soothed and comforted. We come to encounter the living God, within the context of community. To let God's word challenge and re-shaped so we can go out to incarnate, to make visible, Jesus' witness of love, forgiveness, justice and peace in this world.

Your Discovery Team (the group of eight church members helping me guide our interim process, before you call a new pastor) has laid out a month of intriguing worship-work for you. About 6 weeks ago, they held small groups on Sunday morning, in the midst of worship, focused on uncovering the core values you all hold. Our values get played out in large and small decisions that guide our behavior as a church. The intent was to come to better understand the core values and the shared beliefs of this congregation – the who you are as a church, all of which will help tremendously in the eventual search for your new called pastor.

What did we discover about what this congregation values? We used this imagery from the Apostle Paul about the church being the Body of Christ – the visible reality of the presence of the Risen Christ in the world. The groups were asked to imagine what the Body of Christ that is Falcon Heights Church UCC might be like in 2020. What would characterize this church if it were vibrant, transformational and visible enough to catch the attention of a local journalist? How might that future newspaper article describe what had caught the newspaper's attention? The top values that were chosen to describe a future vibrant and transformational congregation included: **Community, Spirituality, Love, Inclusive**. These were followed in priority by: **Laughter/Fun/Joy, Caring, Acceptance, Family, Mission, Justice**.

Your Discovery Team decided that during June we would take one of the top four values each Sunday, explore the biblical basis for these values and see what we mean by saying they are important to us. We begin today, with the value of Community. Inside your bulletins, you will find a bright orange card that invites you feedback. In the next few minutes, I urge you to write some notes about what Community means to you at this point your life. See if you can answer the question, from your perspective, "Community is....." Is there a question, a

wondering you have about Community? Complete the second statement “Is Community.....?” Put these in the offering plates when we receive our morning offering, and then join me and a few Discovery Team members, after worship, for some more informal conversation at our Round Table Chat about Community.

We have no record of Jesus speaking directly about the value “community.” While he had certainly been part of the local Nazareth community before his itinerant ministry, we never see him staying in one place long enough. How would he have coped with a crabby neighbor, a gossipy or a bossy synagogue member, or his own nuclear family? But we have a strong record of Jesus talking about how God intends individuals and groups of people should interact with one another. In today’s passage from Matthew he speaks of the need to stay “salty” and to “be a light to the world.” Jesus doesn't say, “If you want to become salt and light, do this....” Or, “Before I'll call you salt and light, I'll need to see this from you....” Rather, he says both simply and directly, “You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.” I hear this as description of what it means to be Christian community, where we are followers of this Jesus.

“How on earth does salt lose its saltiness,” the biblical commentator David Lose asks. Doesn't it just dissolve and disappear? And what's with this “don't hide your light under a bushel” business? You end up either burning the straw bushel basket or your light, lacking oxygen, goes out. Again, the light dissolves and disappears. “Maybe Jesus is implying,” continues Lose, “that one can lose one's status as salt and light. Or maybe he's just naming the absurdity of the possibility of losing one's character as salt and light in order to underscore the reliability and resilience of the gift he bequeaths.” (From Working Preacher website, 1/30/11, www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1543)

The other thing to notice about being salt or light as a community is that neither of these, salt nor light, are really useful alone. The importance of each is in what they do when applied to others. The salt brings flavor, and can actually preserve things. The light illuminates. People coming together in Christian community are not there for themselves. That would seem to be Jesus' perspective. This would mean that we gather together for others, not ourselves. We come for the others among us and others still outside our doors. This has some pretty wild implications. For starters, it means that Sunday worship is not just for our individual entertainment or even our own personal spiritual comfort. Worship is for the proclamation of the Gospel, in a variety of ways that make it possible for all kinds of people to hear the Good News and connect with God's transforming power.

But, given how long people are living these days, we have at least five different generations in our congregation. Each with different life experiences, perspectives on the world and family and work, favorite music, and assumptions about church. We are all going to have different comfort zones and interest levels when it comes to music in worship, the way we pray together, how we move around this space, how edgy the sermons get when it comes to social justice

issues, what the arrangement of the Sanctuary furnishings looks like, how decorous or how rowdy we get in here. The choice to have a blended service like we do, where everyone experiences something that resonates with them but no one feels comfortable the whole time, can be very challenging. It entails sacrifice on everyone's part. Especially as we seek to incorporate more elements that will relate to younger generations (people younger than me!). Should being in community entail personal sacrifice? I think so.

Let's move on to the Apostle Paul for some perspective on this. Paul, the early church outreach guy. His letters to the new worshiping communities that he establishes all over Asia Minor are urgent, filled with lots of directives, and frankly sound sort of bossy. But I tell you, he is on to something here when he talks about the faith community as being the incarnated Body of Christ in the world. If you ever wondered if church is just a social club or a do-gooder community center, well look out. The spirit of the living Christ, the Messiah, God's anointed one, is embodied in the worshipping community of the followers of the Jesus Way. That's us. In my view, that doesn't make us better than anyone else. We do not have a monopoly on righteousness or eternal life; our religion is not the only way to connect with God. But as the church community, we understand ourselves as the living manifestation of the Risen Christ. And as we live together as part of the Body of Christ, we are slowly formed and changed and transformed into being more loving, forgiving, daring people.

We accept that we bring different gifts to this Body, this community. We know the Body can get wounded, and we seek its healing. We don't just say things are all better now because everything seems a little calmer after a time of hurtful conflict and strong financial pledging has resumed. We realize that community is not just about being nice, but about being accountable to one another for our behavior and what we say. Have we injured someone? What would it look like to reach out and have some healing conversations? Has someone injured us? What would it look like to stop sitting on the bitterness and to reach out in the hopes for some mutual understanding and possibly forgiveness? Not to prove your point. On the contrary. Perhaps to be curious about, to better understand, someone else's differing perspective.

These are some of the Biblical foundations of community. I invite you to take a few moments and jot down some of your thoughts and questions about community. Please them in the plate; then join us at Coffee Hour for some more informal discussion. Let's keep exploring about the value of community together. Amen.

(Note: David Lose is a former preaching professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN and currently serves as President of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.)