

“A Vision of Loving One Another”

Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt

I am not going to preach for 20 minutes and then give you a 10-minute survey. I'm going to preach for a much smaller period of time and then give you some time to fill out a survey. I mention that I have only heard of a congregation doing this once and I want to give you an opportunity to complain, should you hate this idea. [Laughter.] The only church that I'm aware of that has done this, that I'm personally aware of, is one that I visited about eight years ago. I was visiting this church and they happened to be doing this the Sunday that I was there, and, so, I got to appreciate that. And, that is where I got the idea. So, if you wish to complain, I invite you to e-mail Pastor Matt at Plymouth Congregational Church, because this was their idea. [Laughter.]

This passage touches me. It is a neat vision of what Jesus had created in his relationship with the Disciples, and I think it is helpful to think about the fact that we often describe the Disciples as the 12 Apostles - those 12 who were chosen and set apart to be sent. But Jesus actually had a larger group of Disciples – scholars. It looked more like 120 people who would have been gathered and would hear these teachings. So, he was potentially describing this to a group much larger than just the 12; these folks who he had just entered into this relationship of love with. *As I have been loved by the Father and kept my commandments I have abided in my Father's love and so I have loved you, and if you abide in my love you will keep my commandments. My commandment is to love one another.* It is this vision of a community created by the Spirit of God, by God's love flowing into each one of us and outward toward each other - this community that demonstrates to one another the kind of love that God has for each of us.

I was preaching on this passage in my first year as a pastor. My first call was to Tokyo, Japan. I was serving an English-speaking congregation as an Associate Pastor in downtown Tokyo. I was preaching this sermon to them and was sharing with them about the community that I had experienced where I was touched this way. It was the community that I had just come from, essentially, the Calvin Crest Community - you have heard me share about the people I worked with there. We had been working together on a team - a small team of three of us - and we were in a discipleship program, having students come for two weeks at a time, ministering to them and helping them to become leaders.

This team of three of us would pray together regularly throughout the day and we would share with each other what was going on, and pray for each other. One of our team members was sharing with the three of us one week about some struggles that she was having - some concerns with her immediate family - with her mom, sister and brother. They were concerned. They were anxious about what they could do financially, and she was trying to help them.

As an outflow of this, at the end of the week after we had prayed for each other, I was moved to sign my paycheck over to her to help her family. Now I want to make it clear that this is not an enormous thing to sign over a camp check – camp people are not paid a lot. It was this opportunity for me to share with her and to be one with her in the struggle that she was having. It was just a natural outflow of what God had been doing with us.

I described that to my congregation in Tokyo as the kind of thing that God's love can accomplish in community and one of the members - after our second service - came to me and said, "Now, I appreciate the picture, Bill, but you should recognize that we are not going to accomplish that kind of community, just coming once a week and sitting next to each other in worship."

To a certain degree, it was popping my bubble saying, what could Church be, compared to what your ministry team was? And, in another sense, it was also a challenge to be that kind of community - to have that kind of love together for one another likely does take to get to know one another in a way that we could not do, just sitting next to each other in worship.

I was sharing this with Pastor Ken Arentson. Pastor Ken Arentson is retired and you don't see him, but he is quietly here. He meets with me once a week to teach me about the history of our congregation. I was sharing with him about some of the feedback we had received from one of the Vision Sessions, from the people who wished they had the opportunity to be more connected, and we were talking about how that happens and what it looks like, and what it means to be a small group, or some sort of connectional opportunity.

He said, "You know, it is a funny thing, Bill," and he told me about a previous congregation that he had been in. He said, "There was this group that got together, and I wasn't sure what to think about it at first. Was this really a Church group? Was it a Christian endeavor?" The group liked to do pottery.

One of them happened to have a kiln that she was no longer using - like the studio had closed - and so they gave it to the church, and the church set it up, so they had the kiln. These women would get together and do pottery regularly. It was their love and passion, and they got to know each other.

As they did this, in the midst of the relationships that they developed, one of the women lost an animal that was very dear to her. I regret that I don't remember what kind of animal it was. My best recollection was that Ken was describing a prize young cow that was really dear to her. The other women quietly got together, and they fashioned, from pictures she had, a replica of her animal out of porcelain, and made it for her, and gave it to her. It was an incredibly moving moment for this woman who received it.

It was an outflow of the relationship they had together, and it was kind of a pastoral care, one to another, that Ken was describing - that our Deacons couldn't have accomplished in her life. The pastors, as much as we would have desired to connect and counsel with her, could not have done for her what those others did. So, he [Ken] said he thought he learned through that, that there was something about being together - getting to know one another, being "knit" together - that created an opportunity for God's love to be at work in their midst.

Churches, in general, seek to provide a space for their members to enter into fellowship together for mutual support, for what Jesus was describing here - for an opportunity for the love and community to flow outward. And it is a challenge to figure out how to provide opportunities. Different Churches have different methods.

Part of what we have heard, as we have gathered information from the different visiting sessions, [is that] we have had some people describe that they wished they had some opportunities to connect and hadn't found it. And, a couple of other things have come together that actually flow into why we have done what we have done in the survey that is next to you all.

One of them was that people asked, "I drop the kids off for Sunday school, and I would like to have something I could be a part of - either a chance to connect with one another, or an opportunity to get to know or learn something at that time." Others, in general, have asked for a chance to have adult Sunday School at the same time as children's Sunday School. You can imagine, on the other side of this, we have had our Sunday School program for adults following worship, and we don't have a children's event. So, families with children don't have anything that their kids would go to. That is one of the challenges - or tensions - that have been brought up in the scheduling.

And, another piece is - that we were looking at this, and asking and exploring - is that our choir is an active part of our adult Christian Education program. They are perhaps the largest portion of our All things Considered class that meets following worship. Were we to just take that and move it before our worship service, they would not be able to participate, because they have to gather as a choir and get their robes on, and prepare for the music [they sing in worship]. That is a collision.

I say all of this together. I say we, as a Church, are seeking to find God's vision for how we might best be the Church that God has called us to be. And, we have been asking for our members' input. This survey is an outcome of that. That is our best effort to create something, to invite you to participate to help us, for the input that we need to discern what would be best.

The first page of the survey is difficult. It is one that a staff member described it as mind-numbing, I regret that. [Laughter.] We spent about 45 minutes, with five of us, this week, contemplating what it is that we were trying to find out. How we might ask the questions, how we might make it simpler, and ultimately resolved that as hard as it is to fill this out, we couldn't think of a better way to ask these questions - so I regret that.

I want to make that apology up front and to let you know why we are asking. The reason we are asking is, we want to evaluate what is the best way that we, as a congregation, could do our Sunday mornings. And the input that we really would benefit from you all, is if you could help us see, as you look through those schedules, when would be the times that would lead you to most often attend. What other things are there in your lives that would push against that? So, you have a whole series of schedules to indicate whether you would be able to attend worship, or if you are likely to attend worship or likely to attend Sunday School. I just offer that all to you as an explanation and an apology. It was the best we could figure out how to do it. Thank you for your patience with that.

I wanted to say one more thing about this: We have the fifth page of the survey [which] you can ignore. You don't have to fill it out at all, unless you attend with children. If you bring children to Church at any point during the week, whether they are your children, grandchildren, then or your friends' children. If you attend with children, we are asking for

you folks to please fill that out, because we are seeking to find out how to best fit our Sunday mornings, our Wednesday evenings, as a whole. How to attend to that.

Finally, regarding the survey, this 5-page survey is for adults. It is intended for the adults in our community, but we have another survey - a children's survey - and we would invite our children to please fill that out. You can draw pictures if you like. You can write answers. If you would be willing to share with us what you love about Westminster, we would love to hear that, to see it, and we would like to share it with our Session members and our congregation. So, we invite you to spend these 10 minutes filling that out.

With that, I would like to invite Kris to play for us, Kris has been gracious enough to bring her harp, I love her harp, and she will play for us these next 10 minutes, as we invite you to please provide your input, as we seek to be the best congregation we might be, to carry out God's work.