

Peas in a Pod

“Be glad we belong together.”

I Corinthians 12:12-26

God's Thinkers and Tinkers: taking care of God's stuff #5

Rev. John H. Hice

October 4, 2009

First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Living Severed

I had settled into my window seat on the flight to Denver. A guy in a business suit loaded his brief case in the overhead bin and took his seat on the aisle. I was thinking, “Good, maybe we’ll get to spread out a little with the seat in between left vacant,” and was beginning to exchange some of those introductory things you say when you’ll be sharing a ride for a couple hours when a lady approached us.

In fact, it wasn’t just a lady. It was a young mother with a child who was little; like, maybe about six or eight months old. The little one was at that age when flying at high altitudes seems always to hurt their ears and there is nothing they can do, and nothing anyone else can do, about it. It just hurts; and they’re apt to cry – loudly – the whole trip. Did I mention this was going to be a two hour trip?

I didn’t say anything. Neither did the guy on the aisle. In fact, when it became obvious that the mother and the child were going to be sitting in the middle seat, we probably gave smiles that were...courteous.

It might be that we weren’t very convincing; or she might not have noticed. In fact, she kind of lit right into us, taking charge of the situation. She said, “Listen, on my way to Chicago, I came to sit down and there were two businessmen who were there and they looked at my baby and me and while one groaned, the other actually said, ‘Oh no. You’ve got to be kidding;’ and I just won’t have it.”

I was smart enough to say back, “You’re kidding me! Someone would say that?”

So we made room and helped her settle in with baby bag and child.

It seems anywhere in the world you can find nice people who are gracious and you can find selfish people who are not. Anywhere in the world; and since people so often give each other a hard time; well, that’s just what you come to expect.

The Body of Christ

In fact, that's what a lot of people come to expect everywhere, including in church. They might even have good cause. I was in a meeting once where several people said that they wouldn't go to any church because of some very hurtful things that they experienced when they were young and their families were rather publically in trouble. I've heard others say that they wouldn't ever go back to a church because they visited one once and sat down in a pew and were told in no uncertain terms that it belonged to someone else.

Never going back because of that? It might seem harsh; but it's almost like they expected something better in a church than they would anywhere else. Disappointing. How would you like to go to church and have someone look at you and say, "You've got to be kidding?"

I have a friend who decided that he wasn't going because, well, what do you need a church for? He said, "I think each of us is our own church." That was 40 years ago. He's a fair and honest guy, and he believes in God and Christ, I think. He respects people who go to church and has a high regard for a lot of things that churches do. But he still doesn't think he needs one.

Each of us is our own church. He might have a good point, you know. Really, what do you need a church for?

The people of ancient Corinth might have seen what was going on in the Christian church there and would have had good cause to wonder. This church had a lot of bickering going on. It was filled with cliques that competed over which one was more spiritual and important than the rest. In those times the Lord's Supper was celebrated during huge potluck dinners; but in the Corinthian church, rich people got there early thinking only of themselves. By the time the poor arrived after work the rich had gorged themselves with food, including the communion bread, and drank themselves silly with the wine. There was nothing left.

It was everyone for themselves.

And Paul, who had started the church, heard about it and said, "The way you're acting, you are condemning yourselves. You are looking like anything but a church. Church is for looking out for each other. In church, everybody gets fed."

Because Jesus loved us *all* so much he brings us together: rich and poor and people of different races. Buckeyes and Spartans and Wolverines; people who are gay and straight; Republicans and Democrats and even Socialists; people from every tribe and nation in the world: we all belong to him and we all belong together. His Spirit fills us together.

Together, we are his Body continuing to live out his life and his purpose in the world. This is where it's supposed to be different, different than, "Oh, you've got to be kidding." Here it's supposed to be "I'm glad you're here."

Here it's supposed to be like we belong together like peas in a pod. Paul said it's like one of us is a head and another a foot and one is an eye and another an ear: we are all different. Yet, we all need each other. We each have a unique purpose. In fact even though we might think that each of us is our own church, we really can't live without each other. Not very well: when one of us hurts, we all hurt. When one of us succeeds, it's all ours to celebrate.

I never had that pointed out so strongly as the time I saw a poster in a church that said, "The Body of Christ has AIDS." The Body of Christ undoubtedly does.

But there's something beautiful about it, you know, when you and I find ways to belong to each other. God created the church from the beginning of time to love and be loved. From the start we've been brought together to live like God would want the whole world to be living. When we do it, it gives the world hope. It shows the world what it is and also what it can be.

When we live together like the church, then maybe we are kind of place people want to be; and then not only be, but also belong.

One Body

That's what Communion is about. It's about coming together at Jesus' table knowing that we belong to him; where having fellowship with him makes it obvious that we are connected to each other. You connected to me and all of us connected to each other. On this World Communion Sunday when we imagine all God's people all around the world gathering around this table, it means you and I can be reminded that we also belong to Christians who aren't Methodists and aren't American and who worship in ways that we might feel terribly uncomfortable and yet we still belong together.

I think that is hope for the world.

Which brings me back to the mother and the child on the plane. Around the time I met her I would intentionally take some Christian book I wanted to read anyway, letting it be visible to just see what kind of conversation it might start. So I had a book, and the mother soon saw it and asked what I was reading. One question would lead to another and before long she knew I was a United Methodist pastor from Michigan and I knew she was a young mom who had grown up in a United Methodist Church in suburban Chicago. She had been visiting family and was on her way back to her present home in Colorado. She was a Christian and she had a lot of questions and a lot of things to talk about. And soon it seemed like she was comfortable.

Like she was with family.

Then, when we had been in the air for quite a while, probably flying somewhere over Nebraska at 35,000 feet, she looked like she was going to ask me to do her a favor. She said, "Listen, I have to go back and use the restroom. Could you take care of my baby?"

And she left the baby right there in my arms. The baby never cried.

Not so much credit to me as it was to her church back in Illinois and her church in Colorado that she figured she could ask someone who was also a part of the Body to do something like that. (Of course, where was I going to go at 35,000 feet?).

We are God's thinkers and tinkers taking care of God's Church. God trusted us, he put its well-being in our hands. So, we need to take care of each other. Take care of each other so that there is trust: like we're the place someone would come to visit and come back again so that they could belong; like we're the kind of place that would turn "You've got to be kidding," to "I'm glad you're here."

We might be the kind of place that people would say, "They're the folks I'd trust with my child." Do you think we are?