

“Rethinking Church; Reaching the Community”

Second Sunday after Epiphany/Human Relations Sunday : January 16, 2011

Jeremiah 17:1-5; Acts 2:41-47

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

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What is “church?” I find the metaphor used in the 17th chapter of Jeremiah helpful. The prophet is offering the people of God a picture of hope and abundance in a context of despair and deprivation. The tree is planted by water, sending its roots out to a stream. Then, when the drought comes the tree remains lush and bountiful. It is a metaphor that can be applied to the church: like a tree, the church is planted – we are planted – and spread our roots out to reach the community. In good times and in challenging times, when there is hope and when despair overtakes people, this tree – watered and sustained by God’s spirit – remains lush and bountiful, a source of nourishment and shade and strength for all God’s people.

What is “church?” United Methodists developed a slogan in 2001 that we have all come to know and affirm: *Open Hearts; Open Minds; Open Doors*. We have it on our sign outside. These words define us and our mission. As United Methodists we are called to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We are called to open our hearts, minds and doors to change and differences.

What is “church” to you? Perhaps church is where you go on Sunday morning. Maybe church is the comfortable, safe building we are in. Or is the church the people of this congregation who extend friendship, love and acceptance to you and to others? Hopefully, “church” for you is a positive concept and a helpful mental picture. I wish that was true for all people. Alas, it is not!

How often have you heard one of your friends or neighbors say that they are spiritual but not religious ...that they don’t believe in so-called “organized religion” ...that they believe in God but refuse to affiliate with a local congregation. When asked to express what kind of picture they have of “church” such people often say things like: “I see church as a place where people are other worldly and hypocritical,” or “I see church as too focused inwardly, and too closed-minded, instead of focused on helping with the hurts of the world.”

It is hard for us to understand why for some people “church” is a really negative word.

But the empty pews in churches speak to this increasing trend which over many decades has resulted in the decline of mainline denominations. Little wonder that the leadership of United Methodism has called on us to take on the challenge of rethinking what it means to be church and to do church in a major re-imaging and awareness campaign called *Rethink Church*.

The person who was selected to head up the agency to promote the *Rethink Church* campaign in United Methodism, Kerry Graham, said he hoped that *Rethink Church* would help shake United Methodist churchgoers out of a Sunday-only malaise. Graham said: "Sometimes, those of us who attend church on a regular or even a sporadic basis get lulled into a bit of a 'Sunday experience' hypnosis. We forget we are all called to live church and the teachings of Jesus every day ...*Rethink Church* is a wake-up call to remind us of the many needs in our own backyards and around the world, and to call us to action in any one of the thousands of programs, missions and initiatives The United Methodist Church is already engaged in."

The challenge of *Rethink Church* is heightened when one picks up the New Testament and reads about the formation of the Christian church in the Acts of the Apostles. Unfortunately, sad to say, those very bad and scary images of church and organized religion referred to earlier do exist in our society, if we would just look around objectively. They are so different from the report of what was going on in the original community of Christians just a few weeks after Jesus' death and resurrection.

For our New Testament lesson we just read part of the second chapter of Acts: the record of the first followers of Jesus Christ who heard the invitation from Peter to join the Jesus movement. They did what Jesus' friends have always done. They met together for study and prayer and mutual support and encouragement. They ate together. They shared what they had with each other with glad and generous hearts. They would not let any person go in need when another person could share and make a difference. And every day God added to their number persons who were being saved. We need to return to those simple ways of being and doing church.

Rethink Church is helping us do that. *Rethink Church* is being seen as a personal wake-up call inviting all United Methodists to change old ways of thinking, believing, and expressing our Christian faith. Bishop Sally Dyck, president of the United Methodist General Commission on Communication, said: "*Rethink Church* will be an opportunity for people within the church

to go deep into what is the meaning and purpose of church. It will help the church make a transition into a new way of being in a rapidly changing world. Unless we *Rethink Church*, we won't be able to make the needed changes."

Rethink Church has raised many thought-provoking questions for local churches and congregations to explore and live out what it means "to be and to do church" today. Most of the questions start with the words "what if?"

- What if church was less about Sunday, and more about the other days of the week?
- What if church wasn't just a place we go, but who we are and something we do?
- What if church wasn't just a building, but thousands of doors, each opening up to a different concept or experience of church?
- What if church offered a story of God, not as an angry finger-shaking judge, but a compassionate and patient God who offers grace and new life and new beginnings, a God like the story Jesus tells of the father who welcomed back the foolish son and celebrated because the one who had been lost had now returned?
- What if church is where we see more clearly the humanity of Jesus, the compassion and grace of Jesus?
- What if church is where we give each person a chance to make a difference with the talents and skills and gifts God has given us, a place to serve as well as receive?
- What if church is a community where *all* people are welcome and where each of us is on our personal spiritual journey and where each of us is being saved, being made whole and there is no room for self righteousness or arrogance or hypocrisy – where we are just all on the journey together?

What if that is what church is like? Can you be excited about being part of that kind of church? Can you be excited about inviting others to come and take a look for themselves? Can you be excited about seeing Memorial Church as a tree planted by the refreshing, living waters of God's spirit and spreading out our roots to reach the community? For Christians "community" is where we practice our faith, and building community is certainly part of what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Tomorrow we observe a holiday to remember Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King worked to create what he called "the beloved community." It was the community that Jesus

wanted to bring about. I am convinced it is the community that Jesus wants *us* to help him create ...a community in which all people are equal ...a community in which each and every person is “beloved.” Dr. King wrote to the ministers in Birmingham, AL from his jail cell. Called *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, his letter has become a classic piece of literature. In it he wrote, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” On this Human Relations Sunday let us recommit ourselves to creating “the beloved community” and see that no one experiences injustice.

We can reach out to this community when we get to know our neighbors, and work to see that they are treated justly ...when we give hope ...when we help to shape a future filled with opportunities ...when we invite others to experience the freedom and joy of being the church ...and when we, in partnership with the Holy Spirit and this church family, collaborate to *Rethink Church*. Then we will see this amazing New Testament church of Jesus Christ emerge ...the “beloved community” in which all who believe are together, and have all things in common ...who spend much time together in worship, breaking bread and eating their food with glad and generous hearts ...praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. Then day by day we will see the Lord adding to our number those who are being saved.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.