

## **ARE WE A BELOVED COMMUNITY?**

**Acts 2:37-47**

**Preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday, October 4, 2015**

Last Sunday's scripture from the Acts of the Apostles told what happened immediately after the twelve disciples witnessed Jesus' ascension into heaven. Remember? As Jesus disappeared into the clouds they just stood there amazed and dumbstruck. It took two angels to get them going back to Jerusalem to wait and pray for the Holy Spirit to empower them to become apostles, or ambassadors of Christ's Kingdom. They were no longer students and followers. Now they were teachers and leaders, charged with gathering new disciples through their teaching and servanthood.

Recently we got a good look at a modern day apostle when Pope Francis came visiting. He brought with him the power of the papacy but also the humanity of Christ. His message of selfless, unconditional love was not only communicated through his words but especially in his authentic personality. He found the way to balance power and prestige with spontaneous demonstrations of selfless love by stopping to bless children in wheelchairs, serving meals in a soup kitchen and visiting prisoners in a penitentiary. Cynics would say he's a master showman, the rest of us would admit we should be more like him. If we ever are, the world will be better for it.

Why is Francis so good and loving? Why would an eighty year old man be so ready and willing to interrupt and prolong his already grueling schedule making time for children, the poor and the prisoner? A clinical psychologist might suggest Francis has a needy personality but he found a healthy way to meet his ego needs by giving love to receive love. To prove his point the good doctor would remind us about the times we saw Francis perking up and becoming animated whenever he was in the vicinity of needy people. Was he anticipating their love, like an addict anticipates his next fix?

There might be some truth to this rational explanation of Francis' personality. Does it go far enough or does it fail to take into consideration the mystical considerations of the human spirit?

Rich Warren points out God gave each one of us the body, personality, background and ethnicity we have for a divine purpose. Warren also believes that purpose is found in serving God through others. Everything about us, our strengths and our weaknesses were all put there by God.

Warren also famously stated in the very first line of *The Purpose Driven Life*, "It's not all about you." Instead it's all about God offering up himself for us. Out of this synergy comes the desire to turn around and offer up ourselves to Good and others.

This is where the psychologist's sterile diagnosis of Francis' personality falls apart. If Francis was only a sponge absorbing needy peoples' love to meet his own emptiness, sooner than later it would be so apparent, even a five year old child could see right through him. But we don't see even a hint of self-absorption in Francis we sometimes see in celebrities and politicians. (I don't want to get in trouble and name names, so I'll leave that up to your imaginations.) Instead, when you see Francis you see Jesus and his hope is others will see Jesus in us too. That's his purpose as a modern day apostle of Christ's Gospel.

So how did Francis become the man he became? Can it be explained by his environment along with the chemical imbalances in his body informing his personality to be nice to others so they'd be nice to him? Or, is there a better, fuller explanation for the formation of his personality.

Forty years ago when I entered Princeton Seminary I was sent there to learn theology, the Bible, pastoral counseling and church administration. Forty years ago when a young man entered at Roman Catholic Seminary he was also taking courses in theology, the Bible, pastoral counseling and church administration but he was also expected to go through the ancient discipline of spiritual formation. Not only intellectual growth but also the seminarian's spiritual growth was included in the Catholic seminarian's education.

From the time he entered the seminary, Francis was engaged in the intentional process of spiritual formation within the framework of the beloved community. This Spiritual Formation can only happen in the Beloved Community. You can't have one without the other.

I should now define my terms.

First, spiritual Formation:

- 1) Spiritual Formation is getting to know yourself by getting to know God or better still, becoming aware of the presence of God within you. You can only know yourself by knowing God because you are created in God's image. By knowing God you can experience friendship with God and yourself.

God is your life source. As Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches, cut off from me you are nothing."

Second, the term The Beloved Community

- 2) The Beloved Community is God's people gathered together in order to be separated from the world under the Lordship of Christ. In community we can love and be loved and then empowered by each other, through the Holy Spirit, to be sent back into the world to bring Christ's Gospel so others can be welcomed into Christ's beloved community.

I would submit Pope Francis' personality and behaviors are, to some extent, driven by his psychological makeup (which comes from God), however, his personality and behaviors are also informed by his years of intentional prayer, meditation and spiritual conversations within

the context of the beloved community. Through these spiritual exercises Francis was drawn to Christ and given his life purpose.

Today's scripture from the Acts of the Apostles (or if you prefer the Acts of the Holy Spirit) gives us a glimpse into the Beloved Community being formed immediately after Pentecost. (Remember, Pentecost is the day the Holy Spirit, like a roaring wind, blew over the disciples who were huddled in the Upper Room.) Before the Spirit appeared they were dependant on and loyal to Christ but they lacked a mature faith in Christ. After witnessing Christ's crucifixion, resurrection and ascension followed by an intense season of prayer they were ready to take the next step, a step they could never take on their own. More than ever before they were prepared to receive the Holy Spirit. In an instant they became fearless, joyful, troublemakers, ready to accept their purpose: to bring Christ to a broken, needy world.

But before running out in six directions at once to fix things, these first Christians came together, in the beloved community, so they could be fixed. Mind you, they didn't fix each other. God did all the fixing, but they did cooperate with God. They slowed down and rested in God's presence by praying together, breaking bread together, worshipping together and simply being together in community.

In his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, the British scholar William Barclay called this passage an enlightened summary of the characteristics of this first beloved community. Here they are:

- 1) It was a learning Church. The people persisted in listening to the Apostles as they taught. Since the twelve Apostles were with Jesus and heard his teachings firsthand, the people recognized their authority. Maybe the people couldn't meet Jesus personally but they could know his closest friends and learn from them. Barclay wrote, "We (today's Church) should count it a wasted day when we do not learn something new and when we have not penetrated more deeply into the wisdom and grace of God.
- 2) It was a Church of fellowship. Barclay quotes Admiral Nelson when he explained, "I had the happiness to command a band of brothers." The Church is only the church when it is a band of sisters and brothers who encourage and support each other to carry out their primary purpose, to glorify Christ by expanding the boundaries of the Kingdom of God.
- 3)(4) It was a praying and reverent Church. Awed by the power of the Holy Spirit they realized they could never accomplish their mission on their own. Together, they prayed to God before going out into the world for God.
- 5) It was a Church where things happened. If we expect great things from God, great things will happen. Things, great things will happen here too if we trust God and work together with God to make things happen.
- 6) It was a sharing Church. The early Christians shared their burdens and their joys. They were responsible to one another and allowed themselves to be accountable to one another. They realized whenever if they shirked their

sacred responsibilities, they let the whole team down.

- 7) It was a worshipping Church. These first Christians realized everything they did to please God, no matter how small, was in itself an act of worship. Their worship wasn't confined to singing and praying together, instead their lifestyles became worship whenever they loved and served Christ and their neighbor.
- 8) (9) It was a joyful church whose members outsiders couldn't help liking. These weren't cold, rigid tradition keepers, they were warm and generous and outsiders were drawn to them, the same way outsiders were drawn to Jesus.

The sermon title asks the question, "Are We A Beloved Community?" Considering Barclay's assessments I think you'd agree in some ways we are and in some ways we still have some growing to do. No matter how good you are there's always room to grow.

God wants us to grow in our faith and the way we demonstrate our faith. Only then can we become that joyful church outsiders can't help liking. What's more, God wants you to be joyful by having a deeper experience of the ultimate reality we call the Kingdom of God.

Jesus said the Kingdom was like a mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, that flourishes into the tallest of trees whose branches house the nests of the birds of the air. Babcock Presbyterian Church at 8240 Loch Raven Blvd. in Towson, Maryland is now a mustard seed. You are now a mustard seed. God wants to grow you and me into beloved community that impacts the world around us for good.

Show us the way Lord, and we will follow.