

It Is All About Relationships

"The pool is a metaphor for religious symbolism that no longer works. ... To make an imaginative jump - Jesus reminds us that we cannot get by with second hand faith, we need to claim the insights of others for our own. We cannot get by on what others taught, but we must make those gifts of the past our own. ."

Season of Easter

Sixth Sunday

Acts 16:9-15

Read the Bible passage: [Acts 16:9-15](#), The Message; or [Acts 16:9-15](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

John 5:1-9

Read the Bible passage: [John 5:1-9](#), The Message; or [John 5:1-9](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this post.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Have you ever noticed how your awareness is affected by what you read or are thinking about. A certain theme floats around in your subconscious, almost like a piece of music you hum as you go about your activity. Then one day something catches your eye, speaks to you in what you have read, a note makes the hum clearer. Out of this complex you see things that you have not really noticed. They become vivid. They speak to you in new ways.

When it came to these passages this Sunday I began to see a theme emerging in the experiences of the last week. What was raised for me was the grounding theme of the Bible - that it is all about relationships - that holy hospitality is about how we relate to the world around us.

What I am saying is not new but I was reminded this week that one of the major projects of living is about the nature of community. Our questions of who we are and what we are do with our lives is worked out in a world that has lost its center. Peter Berger called it the homeless mind. It is the question of whether we live in a society or an economy. Society means we live in relationships for good or ill. Economy means we serve the interests of commodities - who we are is determined by our consumption not by what we do to enhance the common good. Another book that raised this question was called *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* by Robert D. Putnam (New York: [Simon & Schuster](#), 2000)., Putnam shows how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and our democratic structures. He speaks of social capital - that relating need changes in work, family structure, age, suburban life, television, computers, women's roles and other factors have contributed to this decline.

What struck me was the need for relating is alive and well. We walked our grandchildren to school, and it was clear this was a neighbour event. I don't remember that when my children were young. It suggested a need to check in.

Then I heard a friend give a talk at presbytery on the role of the church and he kept saying it was about building values of relating - caring for the common good. It is still one community group that understands this.

Yet like other voluntary groups - service groups - it is experience a loss of members. People are too busy. People are infected by me-too-ism - the homeless mind. And the good news in face of this is the practicing church movement. Here congregations are reinventing themselves, re discovering the idea of holy hospitality which is all about relating to one another and the common good. It is learning to discover spirituality that informs life. It is to practice the discipline of faith within oneself that will drive us to world loyalty. It is to experience the lure of God as the basis for relationship because the nature of God is the one who seeks relationships, not only seeks to relate but needs to relate.

Then to finish this journey we were at Queens because someone we had encouraged to go into the ministry was graduating. There we heard Bruce Cockburn speak as he received his honorary doctorate. He poetically spun a vision of God's Grace that lures us into communities of concern and action. A Grace that sustains us through the hills and valleys of life. A Grace that he sings about. And afterwards many of us said he had been the sound track of our life, we had been woven together in music and community - we had learned to be lovers in dangerous times. We know ourselves as fellow travelers in this adventure of God.

Then to make the point, to emphasize how much we are a relational people I heard from a friend in Montreal that she had lunch with a friend of ours from Vancouver, and the circle was tightened. We are bound together in a shared vision about the love God.

Our narrative is about this creating of relationships out of the lure of God. There is Paul going to a new community. There is this woman who had been a god seeker - a gentile - part of some Jewish prayer group. And Paul speaks a word, Lydia becomes unbound - finds new energy in his words. Notice then, the next action - she and her household are baptized. Her household. Now in our individualistic age we find this a bit odd. After all have not heard people say "my mother made go to church and that is why I don't go now." My answer is always is, "I see your mother still determines your actions." The comment is a sign of the breakdown of a relational world. What it signifies to me is we have failed to transmit the faith for what we have done is transmitted obligation - not the excitement of the spiritual exploration.

This is the negative side of relational communities. When they lose their dynamic nature they are in the mode of survival, or dogmatism, or the preserving of the status quo. This is when faith is turned into community control. And now that is gone, there is a negative reaction.

George Hermanson

May the Lure be with you

We know that for information to be carried it needs some container. However, in a time of chaos and change we often turn those containers into fixed and unchanged realities. When that happens religion goes bad. And when religion goes bad, like all repressed activity, it emerges in destructive and distorted ways.

So for a whole household today means an encouragement of a relational community that celebrates holy hospitality. This means the affirmation of seeking and searching, an affirmation of difference within a whole. This is a community that does not seek for social conformity but one that seeks to create people fully alive, sing many songs, painting many images, weaving quilts of many colors, knowing each tread is crucial to the whole image.

Turning to John this issue of it is relating that is the issue is even more clear. Picture this, a man lying beside a pool for years on end. The pool is a metaphor for religious symbolism that no longer works. Then there is the picture of every man for himself, the care of one another gone, for this man had no one to help him. Then it was the Sabbath when Jesus does his thing. John is reinforcing the idea of Jesus as a transformer of the prophetic tradition that breaks the idea of orthodoxy and dogmatism ruling our religious life. Again it is an act of holy hospitality - Grace overflowing. Jesus does not ask for a confession - he just says get on with the getting on. To make an imaginative jump - Jesus reminds us that we cannot get by with second hand faith, we need to claim the insights of others for our own. We cannot get by on what others taught, but we must make those gifts of the past our own. This is a reworking. This is another illustration of the confessional approach. It is to claim the inner reality of hospitality for ourselves, and to live it in our relational actives.

At our best we live this relational reality. It is checking in with a neighbor. It is to offer communal prayers for one another and our world. It is to explore the insights that push us into new insights. It is to find the lure of God in unexpected places.

This is this church's gift to this community - the willingness to risk and let go. Is this not the reality of God's love for us? Which is always said metaphorically - a mother hen who cares for her young.

This is the simple message of this week that we live in a relational world. We come out of relationships - this week called Christian Family Sunday - or Mother's Day. It is to honor the gifts of others by reworking them to make them our own. It is to heal the broken communities by word and action. It is to make our relationships stronger and healthier. It is to build on the positive gifts of relationships. It is to affirm the dynamic action of God and not to try to contain it.

George Hermanson,
www.georgehermanson.com