

Charity Doesn't Begin at Home

January 24, 2010

Richmond United Church

Third Sunday After Epiphany

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

Luke 4:14-21

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

When we are faced with events like the earthquake in Haiti we are forced to ask questions about our responsibility to others. Our basic values determine our responses. We can sum up that basic value in a few sentences or one image.

One such saying is "Charity begins at home." This view point does well in a self referencing world, where we think everything that happens is about us. Just look at all the reality shows on TV - these are social artefacts that are completely egotistical. The self has become the center of experience and self interest is considered the highest value. As the old song goes, "You are so vain that you think this song is about you." Our culture wants to reinforce that sense of the ego that is so common today. Just look at ads, or the issues about health care, or the well being of society.

Beginning at home, or the self, as the basic reference seems benign, harmless, as a guiding principle. It does not work as a guiding principle in face of events that are distant and events that are not immediately touching us. It is ultimately destructive. When we focus on our own needs first, the needs of the larger good get lost.

By focusing on our own comfort and well being, our attitudes to larger issues become truncated. This is shown in our attitude to stewardship. Rather than the need of others being our guiding principle, beginning in the self makes our giving what is left over. I think hospital lotteries are a good example of what I mean - it is what you can get that motivates 75% of the money raised ends in prizes and the cost of the lottery, and the hospital only gets \$25. The approach appeals to our self interest in the name of a larger good.

Luke and Paul use two different literary techniques to make their foundational theological point about the nature of reality, God, and our response.

Luke sums up with a beginning story. Who is Jesus and what is to be our response, is the basic theme? Luke lays it all out in the readings. Paul, on the other hand, has been leading up to a climax. He is giving a theology and an organizational plan for the individual and the community that is centered in the love of God - the Spirit that animates all of life.

Over against charity begins at home are the gospel values. Luke has Jesus proclaiming the kingdom of God as a historical reality. Our actions and values ought to represent kingdom values. The sense of God in us ought to guide us in our practices. Jesus announces those values in his quote of Isaiah - it is a world of inclusion where our sense of self is other directed rather than me oriented. The community is to be those who heal individual and societal hurts and problems. Compassion for the least is the grounding, the foundation for community life. The communal work is to provide a reality where we care for the least.

Luke builds on a tradition that he sees realized in Jesus. The church is to be a community of mutual care. To do that they gather to remember they belong to God. Not only do they gather, they gather in sacred space, the synagogue where they listen to the reading of the law. This is important for they are reminded God has blessed them. They are to be a blessing to others. Blessing others is their communal project.

Sometimes this gospel demand can intimate us. It is revolutionary so we ask, "How can I do all that?" It is too much. The job of liberation is too big. Providing a place in our homes of caring and loving is difficult enough, but whole of creation, that is beyond us. So we feel we don't have the power to address the hurts and pain of the world.

The truth is, we cannot escape the relational world. What happens to one, happens to all. Healing does not take place in isolation from others. Just as alienation between two cause a breakdown in a family or a community, when we heal two, it brings healing to the larger context.

This is where Paul comes in, for he provides the practical way we can achieve the common good. Paul's metaphor of the body gives us a model for living and commerce that shows how to put back into the community some of the resources taken out. We are one body, and the earth and we are the many parts.

Paul first provides a demand that is not a demand. He uses persuasion as the motivating force. What he uses is a method of encouragement that honors diversity. He says here are some guidelines. You work them out according to your needs and understanding. He trusts the community to find its way to be a force for good that comes out who they are and what they have. He believes in intentionally which honors the self understanding of a community. It is not one size fit all, but who are we so we can use our strength.

Paul gives a metaphor for being the church. It is a body with its many parts. Each of us has a particular task in the project of healing. Each task will be different. What we need to know is, what is our role - are we a hand? If so, go for it and let the eyes be eyes. We don't have to be every part.

This brings us our task as the body - the community. The finding of our particular offering to the well-being of creation takes others. It takes God. It takes interpretation. That is why the faith community is so crucial to individual and corporate healing. Worship grounds us a community which knows that its task is the healing of the other and creation. It reinforces and strengthens us for our unique and individual roles. By reflecting together we find our individual path. We see by example and by teaching, and by emotions that we belong to God, and to each other. We are individuals in community. What happens to one happens to all.

We need community to help us interpret, to find our individual roles and projects. What needs to be done and what gifts do we bring? The good news is that because there are many we don't have to do the whole thing alone. We find that a task that fits our skills. The good news is this congregation has the resources of the many parts of the body. The only question for the future is how to strengthen the body. In a time of

transition we see the strength of the parts that work. You don't need to replace the strong eye that is working. What needs to be done is find those parts that need to be replaced: the loss of a strong hand means finding a new strong hand.

Finding our strength, we can build. When we take seriously our care of, and being part of the body, great things are done. Healing, restoring, wisdom, the many individual parts in one great faith journey. Thanks be to God.

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