

Here, There, and Everywhere

Genesis 28.10-17 (The Message)

World Communion Sunday

October 2, 2011

God's faith community is found where a child brings a balloon, where old and young alike come to dance, where two or more gather joyfully in God's name.

God's faith community can be seen wherever barefoot children run giggling in procession, wherever the anthem is the laughter of the congregation, wherever the offering plates are full of people.

God's faith community - that we call church - is where children lead and wise men follow, where judges don't judge and each child of God is precious, where people can disagree and hold hands at the same time.

God's faith community is found here, there, and everywhere we recognize God's presence, and proclaim like Jacob – the one with the ladder – “God is in this place – truly. And I didn't even know it!”

Jacob left Beersheba and went to Haran. He came to a certain place and camped for the night since the sun had set. He took one of the stones there, set it under his head and lay down to sleep. And he dreamed: A stairway was set on the ground and it reached all the way to the sky; angels of God were going up and going down on it. Then God was right before him, saying, "I am God, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. I'm giving the ground on which you are sleeping to you and to your descendants. Your descendants will be as the dust of the Earth; they'll stretch from west to east and from north to south. All the families of the Earth will bless themselves in you and your descendants. Yes. I'll stay with you, I'll protect you wherever you go, and I'll bring you back to this very ground. I'll stick with you until I've done everything I promised you." Jacob woke up from his sleep. He said, "God is in this place—truly. And I didn't even know it!" He was terrified. He whispered in awe, "Incredible. Wonderful. Holy. This is God's House. This is the Gate of Heaven."

A Vision of Unity

What a joy it is to close my eyes on World Communion Sunday and envision Christians around the globe lifting up a common cup, that powerful symbol of the one enduring foundation of Christian unity. This joy is enhanced when I note the diversity of those sharing this cup. There are

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numerous ethnicities, divergent cultures, conflicting languages, unique lifestyles, wide ranging clothing styles, different music, dissimilar ways of coming together... diversity upon diversity and wide ranging differences. But for one brief moment all lift up a common communion cup, and affirm that one thing above and beyond all else that binds us together; the presence of God in our midst.

Someone asked me this week how I would explain the celebration of World Communion; what's it all about? Who's it for? I thought about the request for some time and finally decided I would explain World Communion as the celebration of a vision; a vision of what life can be like on God's good earth; a vision of unity in which folk hold hands, smile together, and work together. Sometimes they bicker, to be sure, and sometimes they disagree; but they continue holding hands. Though they find it difficult to understand each other at times, it's easy to recognize the light of God in the eyes of others, identifying them as neighbor.

Step by Step

When you get right down to it this is what church means; building and maintaining relationships of mutual support and love; cherishing the unique value of each individual; honoring the freedom of others while walking beside them in faith, a walk that inevitably takes us beyond the circle of our fellowship. Church is all about relationships; this is why I seldom use the word. I much prefer the phrase faith community because in our day church has come to be understood as an institution as staid as it is cold and dry; an institution focused on its own survival... always its own survival. A faith community, on the other hand, is about being together in healing, joyful ways.

The Church we celebrate on World Communion Sunday is not an institution or a facility. We can't say with conviction that the Overland Park Christian Church sits on the corner of 75th and Conser. This is because Overland Park Christian Church, like any faith community, can't be reduced to a building or an organizational structure, a set of programs or a budget. Church – read faith community – is about actually building community... not meeting to talk about it. Church is about forgiving and accepting forgiveness... not studying the history of forgiveness in the bible. Church is not thinking how nice it would be to get along with our neighbors... it is that moment when we decide that we are going to get along with our neighbor.

Church is not a location or an organization; church is something that we *do*. But we must not assume it's something we do alone. Church is what we do when inspired by the presence of God among us, when united in and by that presence. Church, God's faith community, can only happen when we recognize God's presence with us. You could say that at the heart of church lies a Jacob's ladder experience. The story of Jacob at Bethel recounts in no uncertain terms the power of God's presence to transform and renew, to inspire, empower, and challenge. It is the very foundation of church, and we are not church unless we are climbing Jacob's ladder step by step: forgiving, loving, sharing, and serving.

I chose this story for today's reading because it shows not only the power of God's presence, but its range as well. That is to say, we can know God's presence anywhere; we can become church anywhere. Jacob was in the middle of nowhere when he had his eureka experience; but that made no never mind. Jacob found himself in the presence of God and knew that he stood on holy ground. It's ironic that Jacob was alone in this story, because the presence of God creates community. I choose to think that this solitary figure drives home the point that God's presence can be known in any and all circumstances. It can't be limited in time or space.

This presence, God's presence, is the very foundation on which faith community is built. And God's presence can be known anywhere. God's presence can be known here, there, and everywhere. All we have to do is slow down long enough to notice it. If we will recognize and honor God's presence, if we will accept the paradoxical assertion that Jacob's ladder brings heaven into our midst, then we, too, can say, "God is in this place—truly. And I didn't even know it!"