

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from January 24, 2010

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg
“Family Reunion ”

Scriptures:

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Luke 4:14-21



Over the holiday season, and last summer, too, I heard from several of you about your family gatherings and reunions. The anticipation and the joy in your voices was a blessing to hear. And the single component of these gatherings which seemed to garner the most appreciation was that “Everyone was there!” *Everyone* was there. *All* the kids came. *Both* my sisters could come this year. *All* the grandchildren were able to be there this time. The fact that families had come together in their living entirety was important and satisfying.

I have a friend who is trying to plan a reunion of her 3 siblings and their parents for this coming summer. The six of them have not all been under the same roof at the same time for many years. They live from one end of the country to the other. Their children range in age from kindergarten through adulthood, so family schedules are quite different. Their occupations and those of their spouses are quite varied, also resulting in difficult reconciliation of vacation times. Initial enthusiastic attempts have been made at this in the past, but have usually slowly fizzled as they got stuck on things like the mountains versus the seashore, cabins versus a hotel, or middle of the week versus a long weekend. Interest waned as the same time/same place criteria just could not be met.

However, this year, all parties seem reinvigorated to really try to make it happen this time because both parents had serious health issues this year, reminding them all of human mortality and limited time in this world. The one thing all the siblings agree upon is that no one wants the family reunion to be a homecoming for a funeral. They don’t want to wait until it’s too late.

This morning in our first reading from the book of Nehemiah, we meet the people of Israel as they gather to celebrate their homecoming after sixty years in exile and ninety years of reconstruction. One hundred fifty years beforehand, in 597 BCE, their Babylonian captors had laid siege to Jerusalem and taken the cream of the crop of their people away with them to Babylon. Some ten years later they destroyed the Jerusalem temple and hauled away pretty much the rest of the Jews to Babylon as well. It was the defeat of Babylon by Persia in 539 BCE and God’s moving in the heart of the conquering King of Persia, King Cyrus, which began the release and slow return of the Jews to Jerusalem in the land of Judah to rebuild their temple, their

city, their culture and their rededication to their holy book, The Torah, the Law of Moses, our first five books of the Old Testament.

We meet “all the people” this morning as they gather together in the square, this extended family, whose ancestors had been captured and taken away to Babylon, whose preceding generations had been born in captivity, but who were continuously handed their tradition by those who went before them, the ones who had listened to the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah while they were still in exile who gave them hope and promise from the Lord their God. And we meet them this morning after the Temple has been rebuilt, after they have re-formed as a community, after the reconstruction of Jerusalem, and now they’re celebrating together before God.

Many times at family reunions, maybe after the dishes have been cleared, out comes the old photo album, and the familiar family stories are told and repeated. And I know there has been more than one time that I have looked around at my own family seated around the dining room table as they reminisce and laugh after a rare meal together, and a lump forms in my throat at how precious and how seldom this time occurs.

Now imagine if you will, the square before the Water Gate in Jerusalem, a moment when finally everyone is back in the same place at the same time and all the hard years you’ve been through together are in the past for now, and out comes that book, those scrolls with your family story—from Abraham right on through the death of Moses. We read, “Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people ... and when he opened it, all the people stood up.” And Ezra blessed the Lord and the people answered Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and they worshiped ... and they cried. They wept. They wept when they heard those familiar, cherished words of the Law of Moses, the ones they had heard from parents and grandparents. They wept as they realized, “It’s been a long time.” They wept with regret that they had not always followed their law. They wept as we weep when we encounter and embrace the family members who share our tradition, who remember our parents, whom we haven’t seen in a long time. And we weep tears of regret for the years which passed so quickly, tears of relief at the chance to see them once again, tears of joy and gratitude for this beautiful, meaningful rare reunion.

The people of Israel, the “people of the book” together heard those precious words and 450 years later Jesus is back in a synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth where he has returned after his trial in the wilderness. And like his forebears, Jesus stood up and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him and he unrolled it and he read it to a gathering of the people with whom he grew up and rolled it back up again and gave it back to the attendant. And we read that all eyes were on Jesus. All eyes were on Jesus. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And at that moment he announces his ministry: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. And 2,000 years later, on this day, this Ecumenical Sunday 2010, this 102nd year of setting aside this week as a Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we have over 30,000 Christian denominations across the world, and we could really use a family reunion.

Not that we want to pull together all 2 billion Christians in the world under one roof at the same time, but it would be nice to have a sense that the matters which divide us are small in comparison to those which we hold in common. It would be nice to be able to answer Jesus’

prayer “that they may all be one.”

I have witnessed a microcosm of what that might look like just by being with many of you in lively small group discussions about the Bible, or about how we worship together, or what structure we’re growing into to govern ourselves. I’ve witnessed a freedom here among you to express your differences about the nature of God, your doubts about Paul’s writings, your thoughtful hesitation to wholeheartedly accept things just because they reflect the current culture, your ability to agree to disagree, your openness to different interpretations of the same Scripture passage, or different ways to worship God. And despite our theological and biblical struggles, we all come together at the same time each week under this same roof to stand next to one other before God and to pray for each other and to pray for our world and to thank God for our gifts. Whether we’re red hymnal or blue hymnal champions, we lift our voices together in praise to our God, sometimes using different words, but all with the same intent. And when the people of God in our local community or on the devastated island to our south or in a country on the other side of the earth cry out for our help, we pool what we have and we send help.

Our Tuesday evening Bible class has been reading Paul’s letters to the early churches, in which much of the time Paul is settling disputes among them and within them and telling them to stop arguing with each other. Folks today point to the early church and say, “See? They had factions then and disagreements” almost to justify the state of the Christian church today. Maybe the realization that this has been going on for 2000 years should, instead, move us to finally get together.

So, now imagine if you will a family of several siblings with a common history who decide to sacrifice just one item of self-interest to loosen up the tangled gridlock which has kept them apart. Well, OK, I guess I could leave a day early to get there. Oh, sure, I guess I can manage a few days by the beach instead of insisting on a mountain cabin. Yeah, I could bring the kids if one of your older ones wouldn’t mind babysitting for one night.

Now expand that image to the divisions among our Christian denominations, each one giving just a little, acknowledging that some of their differences are indeed hurtful while some of their differences really make no difference at all; and as each of those points of disagreement are aired and tenderly embraced as legitimate points of disagreement or dissipated altogether through greater understanding, one by one of those Christian denominations gathers in the square until all are there, and once again, all eyes are on Jesus. And we lift up our hands to say “Amen” and we bow our heads and hear his familiar, cherished words: I am the way. Come unto me. I am with you always. And we weep. We weep at the time we have wasted. We weep with the realization that none of us was 100% right. We weep that we are finally together again after being separated for so many centuries. We weep with regret. We weep with relief. We weep with joy that, indeed, we are all one.

May we have our reunion before it’s too late. Amen.

