

40 Days of Community – Part 2

REACHING OUT TOGETHER

Sermon by the Rev. Richard S. McDermott
February 13, 2005 – First Presbyterian Church
Fort Collins, Colorado

PLEASE READ:

Colossians 4:2-6
Philippians 1:3-7, 27-30

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the season of 40 Days of repentance and reflection that begins on Ash Wednesday (which we celebrated this week), that prepares our hearts and minds over that time and ends with the celebration of Christ's resurrection at Easter. And this is the second Sunday of our series in the 40 Days of Community campaign which we will conclude and celebrate on Passion/Palm Sunday, the week before Easter. We have intentionally put the two together just as we did last year, in order to make Lent a time of significant spiritual growth and renewal, as it has been in the Christian Church for hundreds, and even thousands, of years. Scott did a marvelous job of getting us started last Sunday and Wednesday by reminding us that love is at the very heart of who God is, and therefore it is the very heart of Christian community.

The way that people know that we are followers of Jesus (and that his gospel is true) is by our love for one another. Many of you are familiar with I Corinthians 13, the love chapter that is read at many weddings and other occasions. For that reason, we tend to think of couples and marriage when we think of the love chapter in the Bible. But if you look closely at the Biblical context surrounding that chapter, it has nothing to do with couples and marriage. The love that Paul is calling for is love among believers in the church. Now, I continue to read I Corinthians 13 at weddings because the love described is very relevant to marriage, and is the kind of love on which Christian marriage is based. But I always try to put it into the context of the Christian church: this is the love that we church members are to have for one another: love that is patient, kind, not jealous or boastful, not arrogant or rude, one that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. This love that we are to have in our church family for one another, **never ends**, Paul says.

Whoa. Now I can understand the Lord expecting me to love my wife and my kids in this way. But to have enduring and never-ending love for everyone in the church? What was God thinking? More than that, he expects us to have this love for those outside the church as well. Why? Because God loves us, he loves the church, and he loves those outside the church as well. We are to love one another just like God loves us. And the Lord, by his miraculous power and mercy and grace, gives us the ability to love one another as he has loved us. The 40 Days of Community then is about these two things: deepening the sense of love and community within our church family, and also reaching out in love to the community around our church family. Today we are going to focus on how our church family, working together through our small groups and other ministries, can “partner” to reach out and share the good news of the love of Jesus Christ with others. For there is no greater gift that we can offer to anyone in this world than the gift of helping them receive and believe the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ.

On the back of the bulletin is an acrostic with the word “PARTNER” and I will help you fill those in, for those who may want to follow the seven points of today’s message. First of all, though, what do we mean by “partner.” Scott mentioned last week about our society’s obsession with independence and individualism. As a result, we know very little about community, about partnering, and about loving and serving our neighbor, together, with other people. We may love our family, and our good friends. But can we actually learn to live and love and serve as partners in a church family, or in a small group of Christians? For many of us it is a novel concept. It is much easier to stay in our cocoons and our bubbles, associating with those familiar to us, rather than risking being known by someone new and different and maybe even from a different political party or a different part of the country! But, friends, that is how the Christian life is lived! A Christian can’t love a neighbor, *theoretically*. Love is demonstrated in relationship and in action. That is why we are unapologetic about urging people to be a part of a small group for a brief 6 weeks, or longer if possible. That is where God seems always to show up... “for where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them” says Jesus. If you have never tried a small group, or it has been awhile, now might be the time.

Since we need God’s help both to love and to share God’s love, the “P” stands for “**Pray together.**” Individual and private prayer is good. The Lord certainly uses private prayer to transform and speak to us. In our passage from Philippians, Paul tells of his own prayer for the Philippians. But Jesus reminds us that if even two of us agree on earth about anything that we ask, it will be done by his Father in heaven. And in our passage from Colossians, Paul tells the church to “Devote yourselves to prayer.” This reminds us of the importance of and the need to pray together and to pray especially for those who may not know the Lord Jesus and the good news of his love. We are urging our small groups to take the action step of creating a group prayer list, especially of those who are in need of Jesus in their lives.

The “A” stands for appeal. “**Appeal to common interests.**” Before you can share the good news with people, you have to establish a relationship with them. In many ways, you earn the right to be heard. One of the ways to begin a relationship is to look for common interests in your group or your context. There are probably several things that one has in common with a given person or set of people: common experiences, common interests, common needs, common hurts. Football, fishing, golf, kids, and sleep are all things I have an interest in. And each of those arenas are contexts or subjects within which a non-threatening faith discussion can take place. Discover those common interests, look for them and earn your right to be heard in relationship.

The first “R” is for “**Reach out in love.**” The truth is that people don’t care what we know, until they know we care. There are lots of motives out there for getting to know people, and some people join churches for these reasons. They may be looking for clients, or for people with money, or people who know important people (people with connections) or people just like them, or people that might offer them something, or people who can give them the inside scoop, or people who might jump on their bandwagon for some cause. But if we are not reaching out to others in love, and with

their needs and interest at heart, then our message will seem quite shallow and irrelevant. Caring for people by helping with their needs is an important dimension of Christian ministry. It often helps to ask people sincerely, “How can I pray for you?” And ask about their needs, their desires, their hurts and their hopes. So another action step for reaching out in love is to ask God to give us a deeper love for others.

The “T” stands for “**Tell your story.**” Each of us has a story, and you are the expert on your own story. You know how the Lord has worked in your life, how you learned about God’s love and how people might relate to it. Most people enjoy hearing about how God has worked in your life. Just don’t give the 1 hour version on the first try. Share a few minutes of your story with them and save other tidbits for other opportunities. If people respect you, they will respect your story. In Colossians 4, Paul writes, “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” So we are to be wise and to be prepared to share our story, with some answers. The action step we are urging is for people to write out their story about their relationship with God in a brief form and share it with others.

The “N” represents our opportunity to “**Nurture Friendships.**” The Bible tells us to make friends with ordinary, regular people. This step takes a bit more work because it takes energy to build a friendship. But everyone needs friends, and if you are a true friend people will love you for it. You may be the only Bible some people ever read. Think about the people that you are acquainted with and the potential for developing friendships with them, or those with whom you are already friends: work friends, school friends, neighbor friends, cell phone friends. And try something that Jesus and his disciples did: bring a friend to your group and plan a party. The gospels are pretty clear that Jesus showed up at a lot of parties. It is an excellent way to nurture a friendship.

As you grow in your faith you will better understand the “E” which is “**Expect God to act!**” It can get discouraging when we pray for family and friends for many years without seeing much progress in their walk with the Lord, if any. But nothing is impossible for God, and as we grow in our love for God and our neighbor, and we grow in our faith and trust in the Lord, we can indeed expect great things from the Lord. When I first became a Christian, I was pretty obnoxious in my witnessing to my family of origin. I was constantly preaching, cajoling, sending books, giving tracts, and talking to my family about Jesus. But I finally realized that I might be part of the problem. So I started praying in earnest for my family, and backing off a bit. Within a matter of a few years, all three of my siblings had started attending worship at different churches without my prompting, and were making strides in their Christian walk. My parents continued to read good Christian literature and talk about faith more. God isn’t finished with them or me, yet, but I am expecting the Lord to help them to grow even more. Our action step as mature Christians is to never give up on anyone. The Lord is at work.

Finally, the “R” means “**Represent Christ with your lives.**” Paul writes at the end of the chapter that we read, “...live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...” Our lives must match the words that we share. That does not mean that we all

have to be perfect angels, which is impossible. It means that we live like Christ wants us, and when we mess up we 'fess up. We are to live our lives by faith in Jesus, and give him the controls in our life. That is harder for us than most of us are willing to admit. So the action step for this principle is to pray to God the simple prayer, "Use me." That is a very dangerous thing to pray, because the Lord will answer this one on a regular basis. And that will involve some things that no one can anticipate. But it is the greatest adventure on God's green earth.

Pray together; appeal to common interests, reach out in love, tell your story, nurture friendships, expect God to act, and represent Christ with your lives. These are the seven steps we must take as we partner to share the good news of God's love with others. Are you ready for what God will do through you?

LET US PRAY: Gracious and Loving God: Thank you for loving us and for calling us to share your good news and your love with other people. Thank you that we don't have to do it alone, that we may find encouragement, support, wisdom and help from other believers and friends in our groups. We know that as we share with others, you will give us the words to say, as we try to love others, even as you have loved us, for we ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.