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# hearing it again as if for the first time

There needs to be something - a common focus - that draws our church together and identifies us as Christians. Jesus had one last suggestion what that might be.

**This morning is a special day** within the life and witness of Bridge Street United Church. As we formally received these six individuals into our faith community and the Bridge Street family, we are called again to re-think what it is we are all about. What does it mean to be a faith family? What are the privileges and obligations of membership?

The Christian faith has always been celebrated in community. Jesus' first task was in the selection of disciples. The elements of worship, still today, were witnessed between Jesus and that group of twelve, from praying to preaching, from singing to celebrating.

Paul's principal task, as an apostle, was to plant new churches, from Rome to Corinth and Philippi to Thessalonika, to preach the word, share the gospel

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and then set up leadership to that it might continue after he was gone. Although we can and do find God in a quiet space and amid the stillness of our souls, Jesus validated the importance of faith family when we said, ‘when two or more are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.’

Faith is lived in community. Yet community does not arise out of geography and proximity of living and, to speak of church as family, is to understand that it is a family of adoption and not of natural order. There needs to be something that draws us together. There needs to be a common focus, a common understanding and within the life of the church, a common faith. Without it, we could not survive but with it we can thrive.

A common faith and a common understanding. Marion Soards, when commenting on the passage which Kristopher shared from the Gospel reading, writes ‘Jesus gave us in this Upper Room conversation, an understanding of the nature of ministry and the character of Christian community.’

As human beings, many of us are concrete thinkers. We can grapple with the ethereal and think beyond the rational, but there is something about the power of example which is very convincing. God knew this and in Jesus we see more a doer than a philosopher, more a story teller than a theorizer. In his morning’s reading, we find Jesus and his disciples gathering in the Upper Room on the day before crucifixion. Each of the disciples were in their own mind space. James and John were battling to be head

table guests, sitting at the left and right hand of the Messiah. Peter, in his own sanctimonious way, was pontificating that regardless of what happens, he would be with Jesus to the end and Judas, Judas was plotting Jesus’ demise. Such mind-space, such self absorbed mentalities made them loose track of the most common sign of warmth and hospitality . . . that of foot washing. The dusty roads would coat the sandal-laden feet with a layer of dirt and the hosts would wash the feet of guests as they arrived both as a sign of welcome but also to protect their own floors. When Sharon and I were in Laos last summer, although there was no foot washing per say, one was expected to remove their shoes before entering one’s home, a school, Temple, and many public buildings. It was simply a sign of respect.

No feet were washed in the Upper Room. No respect was shown, no welcoming received. Everyone expected someone else to do it. It is something like People walking into church, getting their morning service bulletin and sitting in a pew, hoping that it didn’t belong to someone else. Everyone thinks it’s the job of someone else to welcome and so it doesn’t happen at all. My friends, it is better to get your feet washed twice than not at all!

A while back, I was in a grocery store and a strange request was made of me. I am often asked to reach up to something from the top shelf by someone vertically challenged, but this time, I was asked to bend down. An elderly woman stopped me in the aisle. Ex-

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People often assume that welcoming newcomers is someone else's job. But would you prefer this greeting twice, or none?



cuse me sir, she said, my shoe is untied and I have a hard time bending over. Could you tie it for me?

My mind flitted in many directions. Hasn't anyone told her about velcro, I wondered? Where is Don Leslie, Belleville's original shoe man when you need him? But, instead, I bent down and tied her shoe and that became for me a very spiritual moment. You see, it is one thing to stand tall, but quite another to bend down. Whereas the first might be seen as a sign of power, the later is a sign of humility and while the disciples were fighting over power, sitting tall at the

Upper Room table, Jesus demonstrated humility by dropping to his knees and with a towel wrapped around his waist, one by one, he washed their feet . . . Andrew and Bartholomew, Thomas and Thaddeus, Simon Peter and John, and in so doing, the nature of ministry and indeed the nature of God was revealed.

Later, as we heard in the reading, Jesus explained this nature. 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.' The nature is love. It is not sentimental love. It is not gushy romantic love. It

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is loved based on service, on foot washing, on humility. It is the will to will the well being of others even at cost to oneself. A new commandment, Jesus calls this but it is hardly new. If there is a central theme which runs through scripture, surely it is love. Yet this is the teaching that Jesus saved to the end, one day before crucifixion, to ensure it would be indelibly marked on their brain . . . love one another just as I have loved you. The nature is in the ‘as I have loved you.’

A couple were sitting on a park bench holding hands. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, ‘I love you’.

Say it again, she asked.

I love you, he said.

Say it again, she requested.

Thinking her hearing aid must have been turned off he raised his voice and yelled out , ‘ didn’t you hear me? I said I love you.’

O yes, I heard you, she replied, but even after 50 years of marriage, every time you say it is like hearing it for the first time. Perhaps that’s that newness that Jesus was talking about . . . about hearing it again as if for the first time.

So if this love is the nature of ministry and the nature of God, then we can echo the words of 1st John who writes, ‘Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love’

But, then you may ask, what is the character of Christian community? What

is it that we are welcoming Aurda and Scott, Andrea and Frank & Judith and Wesley to become part of this morning and what expectations do we place upon them and ourselves members as the Bridge Street family of Faith?

Again, we go back to the words of Jesus . . . ‘By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’ Did you note the vows, the expectations which were placed upon these new members? Essentially, there were three. The first one was foundational. Do you believe of God and the way God is revealed to us, through the beauty and order of Creation, through Jesus, the word made flesh and through the Spirit, the power and presence of God in the world today? This is a relationship vow, like the relationship of the old couple sitting on the park bench and affirming their love as if for the first time or as a fresh start coming from God ‘as a bride adorned for her husband with the promise that God will be there to wipe every tear from our eyes.’

But the next two vows are more action based. If the first vow asked what do you believe, the next two ask, what are you going to do about it

*Will you be faithful in joining the Lord’s people in worship, study, and prayer, and will you enter into the life and work of this church, supporting it with your gifts and*

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*sharing in its mission to all people?*

And

*Will you endeavor to respond daily to God's love, to do God's will, and to fulfill your Christian calling?*

Or, in the words of Jesus, will everyone know that you are my disciples, by the way you have love for one another?

When we get down to it, it is not how we pray or sing or preach that is most important. It is not the majesty of the building or the grandeur of the organ. These are all but instruments in the worship experience. Rather, it is how others might know we are disciples by the love we have love for one another. It is in the foot washing and the welcoming of those who enter through our doors. It is our willingness to stoop down and tie a stranger's shoe or living the wonder of love as ever new and ever fresh. It is making room at the table for six more knowing and welcoming them as family. It is without shame or embarrassment taking our place as disciples.

Again Soards writes, this is both simple and complex . . . simple in the words that are expressed but complex in the living of them; simple in living our faith in the church, but complex in living our faith in the world yet does this not need to be the very character of Christian community?

So Andrea & Frank, Scott & Audrey, and in absentia today, Judith and Wesley, welcome to the Bridge Street family. God's love

has brought you here and your faith gives us example as we strive to be the church.

May our nature and character be clear to you and to all

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Hear it again, and again and again, as if for the first time, for it is at the very heart of what God calls us to be.

## Biblical References

Revelation 21:1-6

John 13:31-35

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