

You Call Yourself A Church?

A sermon presented by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers on Sunday, September 10, 2017,
at Trinity (Malton) United Church.

“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Matt. 18:18

American Methodist Bishop Will Willimon spoke about his first church in the following terms:

“It was in rural Georgia. I was fresh out of seminary, eager to be a good pastor in my first parish. My first visit I found a large chain and padlock on the front door, put there, I was told, by the local Sheriff. The Sheriff? Why? (I asked the Board Member who was there to meet and greet me) Well, things got out of hand at the board meeting last month, folks started ripping up carpet, dragging out the pews they had given in memory of their mothers. It got bad. The Sheriff comes out here and put that there lock on the door until our new preacher could come and settle things down. That rather typified my time at that church.”

“I spent a year there that lasted a lifetime. I tried everything. I worked, I planned, I taught, I pled but the response was always disappointing. The arguments, the pettiness, the fights in the parking lot after the board meeting were more than I could take. It was tough and I was glad to be leaving them behind. ‘You call yourself a church!’ I muttered as my tires kicked gravel up in the parking lot on my last Sunday among them.”

Not a happy story.

Here’s another story. Thirty-five years ago a movie was entitled *“The Gods Must Be Crazy.”* It is a clever comedy yet with profound messages. One of the stories in the film is about an African tribe that lives in the Kalahari Desert in the southern part of the continent. This tribe is a community in collaboration and cooperation with one another. The tribe lives well in its work, play, and prosperity. This life is attributed to the favour from the gods from above. From a Christian and Western viewpoint, one may describe this tribe as undeservedly having the attributes of a community of grace. However, one day a glass coca-cola bottle is thrown from an airplane and falls unbroken to the ground. In the movie, the bottle is found among the tribe. Initially, the bottle is seen as a gift from the gods, albeit a strange artifact, but it quickly becomes a tool in the tribe. The bottle is used in cooking, working, and even play. Nonetheless, this tool becomes a temptation. Since there is only one bottle to go around, there begins competition for use of this tool. This leads to difficult experiences for the tribe. They succumb to moments of envy, jealousy, anger, enmity, and even violence. The tool becomes an evil thing. Their community of grace is threatened with turmoil and trouble.

The protagonist in the movie, Xi, offers to take the evil thing and throw it off the edge of the earth. Xi sets off on a quest. With bottle in hand, he is exposed to more of Western culture than just a glass container. One sees his experiences and observations from his viewpoint. Xi learns a number of lessons about the outside world, himself and his tribe.

Two stories of “locked-up and bottled-up people” struggling to find what: a community of grace. Jesus the Rabbi offers teachings as lessons to the disciples and the crowds. Jesus teaches that discipleship in Christ is to follow our Lord and build just such a community of grace. What does it take to do this? The Gospels are teaching manuals for building communities of grace. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, cites challenging admonitions. This passage offers followers of Christ to respond when there appears a strange artifact, such as a bottle, which threatens to harm the community. There were plenty of bottles in first century Palestine. Jesus the Teacher names the misused bottles in order to break their power over the people.

Everyone one of us has missed something. The teaching of Matthew 18 is to examine our conscience in order to build community of grace.

Twentieth-century Christian martyr Dietrick Bonhoeffer taught at an underground seminary during the rise of Nazi Germany. In 1939 he wrote a book entitled "*Life Together*" which describes what a "Community of Grace" might look like. In his book, Bonhoeffer wrote: "Nothing could be more cruel than the tenderness denied that consigns another to sin. Nothing could be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a sister/brother from the path of sin."

My mother lived well into her 80's. She had little higher education, yet, in her wisdom, Mom always took care of anything that could hurt our family. Whenever one of my three siblings had a bottled-up issue, including me, she would employ some of the principles of Matthew 18. When my older brother Roy and I had a tussle, Mom would admonish us to deal with it ourselves. If needed, the issue in the bottle was brought to her for resolution. If necessary, it was to be taken to my father when he came home from work and then everyone in the family would know about this. The strong motivation for my brother and me and my siblings was to find resolution and restoration before Dad came home! Mom kept issues in bottles of a large family from messing us all up!

In "The Gods Must Be Crazy," Xi returns from his quest. He comes back illumined about the Western world. He learns some difficult lessons about dress, trucks, property, law, and what he sees as dependence upon "strange magic." Xi returns to his tribe with gratitude and celebration for he knows a Community of Grace.

We who are disciples in Jesus have a mission to build a Community of Grace that we know as the church. This Community of Grace is not founded on strange magic but on the bountiful mystery of God. We are to worship, work and give for the construction of this blessed, if not perfect, community known as the Church. A medieval saying, "The Church is like Noah's Ark. You can't stand the stench inside, except for the storm outside!"

To build this Community of Grace may be trying, yet ultimately rewarding; it may be petty, yet finally satisfying; it may be difficult, yet in the end joyful. May our Community of Grace not be based on a large chain and padlock on the front door or glass bottles: but on following the teachings of Jesus. Let all people of God says "Amen".

Let us pray. Grant us, O Lord, to trust you with all our hearts for as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boasts of your mercy. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.