

ACTIVITY IN GOD'S NAME SEPTEMBER 14, 2008

The name of this sermon is Activity in God's Name. The reading from Romans in particular led me to think of the new round of activity we are about to enter in the life of our churches. For Friendship United, this Sunday is called Welcome Back Sunday, to welcome all those who have spent the summer tenting, travelling or otherwise occupied. At Wesley, we are also getting back into routine with our Church Council meeting this week to plan the fall activities. Friendship Board met last week and so the planning and dreaming begins to take shape.

I thought of the word activity: the Oxford Concise English Dictionary defines activity as the exertion of energy; the state or quality of being active; diligence and nimbleness of action. It is clear that activity takes energy. It requires our active participation in what we are doing. Thinking about activity is important. It takes a conscious decision to get up and move forward with what we intend to do.

The church is no different from any other community in that it requires the energy of its members to be effective and to function in a planned way. Things do not "just happen" as we know only too well. Things happen when people expend their time and energy creatively to accomplish the tasks before us.

As with any family, the congregation is made up of very different individuals. Committed to a common purpose though we may all be, never the less the group is still made up of individuals, each with their gifts and their way of doing things. How we harness our energy in a cooperative, supportive and positive way is the task for us in our faith family.

Our first reading continues our study of Moses and his leadership in bringing the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt in to new land of freedom. We discussed last week, the moment when the Hebrews realized that they were actually free to leave and begin their journey to the promise land. As the people assembled that fateful morning when the journey was to begin, there was little agreement among them as to what lay ahead. Some were pumped up with excitement, just willing to get started. Others fretted about the things they brought with them, others fretted about the things they were leaving behind, and yet others would prefer to not go into the unknown. Better the devil you know, then the fearful and unsettling prospects ahead.

By the time of the passage we read, Moses has led the group burdened with possessions, food and animals, to the Red Sea. Hopeless many would have muttered. How are we to get across with all of us and our entourage? Pharaoh has us where he wants us and he will likely soon change his mind and come and slaughter us all. We are after all sitting ducks!

Moses, trying not to be discouraged by all the negativity around him, indicates to his people how they are to overcome the impediment of the Red Sea. Go across the new dry land, look forward not back and reach the safety of the other side. Cooperate with one another and we will all succeed in this epic journey.

Just as they feared, they saw the dust in the distance as the Egyptians, now angry after their grief of lost loved ones, rode to exact punishment on the group of fleeing Hebrews. As the Hebrews crossed over to the other side of the river, they moaned and whaled in anticipation of their impending pain and probable death. Keep going, Moses cries, help one another and together we will get across to the other side!

God is with us! Do not lose heart so easily! Do not let the dream of freedom for which we have prayed so long fail by our lack of faith in God. This is God's doing; keep the faith; above all, keep moving and do not worry with anything that may be behind you.

When they get to the other side, Moses being the last to arrive, they stand trembling with fear. What have we done? What will the Egyptians do to us? Then, as they look back in fear, they witness the waters flowing back to cover the pursuing army. They give a collective sigh of relief for their safe arrival. Thankful for their being spared the anger of their pursuers, they stop and finally thank God for what he had enabled them to accomplish. At last, they were free!

It is fascinating to wonder how long they remained thankful. How soon would they reclaim their fears and moan about the unknown which now irrevocably lay before them.

How human they were and how human we are. Our intentions are usually honourable but our words and actions so often betray our mistrust in ourselves and each other. We know God is there with us but our actions appear to belie that belief as we moan and groan and grudgingly move forward to do what we feel obligated to do.

Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome speaks to our life in the Body of Christ which Paul believes is our Lord's church. In this passage, Paul is dealing with a problem which may have been a temporary and local problem in the Roman Church, but which is also a problem continually confronting the church, a problem always demanding a solution.

There are those who believe that in Christian freedom, all the old taboos are gone. There is nothing required of the Christian in terms of rituals of worship, eating laws or meticulous Sabbath observances. Then there are those who are full of scruples. They may believe in strict observance of some laws, dietary or ways of living and find difficulty in believing that freedom in the faith means none of these things are critically important.

Paul does say the ultra-scrupulous man is a man weak in the faith. He has not yet discovered the meaning of Christian freedom; he needs rules and regulations and is frightened by too much freedom. He has yet to see that works in and of themselves do not curry God's favour.

While Paul was a man convicted by freedom found in Christ Jesus, he urges all in the church to be welcoming and tolerant of those who feel otherwise. He asks us to avoid the attitude of irritation or the attitude of ridicule and contempt. Do not work at raising doubt in their own beliefs, but rather welcome all to the community of the church.

Tolerance for differing viewpoints should be the mark of the church and Christians according to Paul. Paul knew in his day as today that there are many a congregation of the Church torn in two because those who hold broader and more liberal views are angrily contemptuous of those they regard as stick-in-the-mud, die-hard conservatives and even puritans; and because those who are stricter in their outlook are critical, censorious and condemning of those who wish the freedom to do things which they think are wrong. Paul warns that it is not open to us to criticize and condemn each other. Paul would have us banish both censoring and contempt from the fellowship of the Church. We are to leave the judgment of others to God, and seek only to sympathize and to understand and to welcome.

Paul was concerned about the Jews overly strict observance of the Sabbath, strictness to the point where the reason for the Sabbath was forgotten and the observances became everything. This strictness often excluded those unable to observe all the laws. Paul urges people to remember why we observe things and recapture the wonder of what we do and why we do it.

Whatever may be the course of viewpoint of the observances of the Christian, Paul insists on one thing. Whatever course a man or woman chooses, let him or her be fully convinced in their mind. Their actions should not be dictated by convention, still less by superstition, but altogether by conviction. He or she should have thought their position out and reached the conviction that for him or her at least it is the right thing to do.

Paul would always insist that no man or woman should make their own practice the universal standard for all other people. This attitude or stance is in fact one of the great curses of the Church. We tend to think how we worship, how we run our church is the best and sometime believe this the only way of worship and practice. Paul urges Christians to be open to one another and to be tolerant of differences of practice and emphasis of doctrine.

Paul claims there is really one fundamental and basic reason why we have no right to judge anyone else; and the reason is that we ourselves are each of us men and women under judgment. All of us stand before the judgment seat of God. God alone has the right to judge anyone. As we all will stand before the seat of God, how can we judge another who also will stand before God's judgment seat?

Paul then reminds his people as he reminds us today that none of us stand alone at the judgment seat of God, for we stand with Jesus Christ. We do not just stand naked and alone for we are in the presence of Jesus our Lord and Saviour.

Collin Brooks, a writer and journalist said it this way: "God may be kinder than we think. If God can not say "Well done, good and faithful servant", it may be that God will say at last, "Don't worry, my bad and faithless servant: I don't altogether dislike you." This is perhaps overstated by Brooks. However, it is not that God merely does not dislike us; it is that, sinners as we are, God loves us for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The writer Barclay says: True we must stand alone before the judgment seat of God in the naked loneliness of our own souls; but, if we have lived with Christ in life, we shall stand with Christ in death, and before God Christ will be the advocate to plead our cause.”

So, what are these passages which share the wisdom of Moses and Paul saying to us as we enter into the fall activities in our churches and as we prepare to move towards the Advent and Christmas seasons? Are there words for us as we seek leadership for our activities in our congregations and as we seek a permanent worship leader for our parish?

Both Moses and Paul would urge us to keep the faith and to keep our eyes on the future. They would ask us to remember who we are and whose we are in everything we do. In our faith as we have come to know it in Christ Jesus, we gather together for worship and fellowship. There is always the task of bringing the message of Christ to those around us in our everyday activities that others may know the joy we feel in God and his love.

Both Paul and Moses would urge us to have courage to step out beyond our comfort level. We need to know that God’s hand guides us and his Spirit ever gives us the courage to try and not be afraid.

Our congregations are as strong as our willingness to do our part, our willingness to take leadership roles and our willingness to assist in the task of evangelism, the declaring of our faith as we have known it with God’s love.

Age has little to do with our ability to share with others the love of God we have known and the love of God we know in our lives. Paul urges us to be tolerant of others, their ways of doing things and their beliefs. We are to build up the community of faith where we are. We need to be fully aware that God will never abandon us whatever we have to face as a worshipping community.

Welcome to the beginning of our fall and winter time together. Let us assume that God has challenges for us and that our time together will be joyous as we open ourselves to God’s Spirit living within each one of us and among us.

If God be with us, who can truly be against us?

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