

To Gather Together

It's quiet over by my place, now that the bridge is out.

We've had rain in the night.

The mist follows the Connecticut river, climbs up the embankments, and lingers in the branches of the trees.

It's the fall in Montague City.

I brush the leaves from my windshield before setting out...

You know what I'm talking about...

Heading east along Greenfield Road, my Prius follows the shrug of the hills, wending left under a stand of old trees.

There is the bike path and, ooh, the charming sulfuric odor of the wastewater treatment plant...

You know what I'm talking about...

There is a long stretch past some old houses and agricultural fields, a swoop around the hill that leads up to the Randall Wood neighborhood, where our kid's babysitter used to live before she went off to college.

I don't know about you, but I can't resist a good little rural shortcut, so I take a left on Greenfield Cross Road to jog over to Hatchery. My wife goes the other way... Why? I will never know!

Which way did you come?

Up 63 and over?

Down Swamp road and up?

Maybe you swung up Old Stage Road, under the sepia shadows of the ancient cemetery, and then turned down Old Sunderland Road.

Or perhaps you simply closed the storm door behind you and took a little stroll up North road, along the side of the conservation land...

You know what I'm talking about.

I came east to church, trying *trying* to obey the speed limit...

Maybe you came from the other direction... under the sweet spell of New England fall...

The point is that you came...

I came...

We came...

Something compelled us

To gather together...

It is common among theologians and scholars of church history to quip, in a rather offhand way, that Jesus of Nazareth did not *create* Christianity.

What?

Isn't Christianity named after Jesus Christ?

Of course, yes. They readily admit that Jesus Christ was the central Messianic figure of the gospels, but as far as *Christianity* is concerned, they contend that the most important figure in the creation of the *religion*, was the Apostle Paul, who dedicated his life to criss-crossing the Mediterranean, telling the story of a carpenter from Nazareth to anyone who would listen.

Jesus was the inspiration, but Paul was the worker bee, encouraging the faithful, giving them ways to think about Jesus, and about their early communities of faith.

Without Paul, the teachings of Jesus might have ended up a footnote scrolled away in the crypt of some distant near eastern synagogue.

In this morning's passage from the Epistle to the Romans, for example, Saint Paul told the early church in Rome to "**boast** in their hope of sharing the Glory of God."

We are a community of faith! How does Saint Paul's encouragement sound to us?

Can we "**boast in our hope of sharing the Glory of God.**"?

The great poet, translator, and Lutheran pastor, Reverend Eugene Peterson was once asked if he had any advice for people trying to choose a church to go to.

"Go to the closest church where you live." He said. And then he added: "...the smallest! If after six months it's just not working, go to the next smallest."

Local.

Small.

Today's world seems, in so many ways, to measure success in terms of global and big – but here is a refreshing suggestion that something that is modest and in our midst may be meaningful precisely because it is modest and in our midst.

The church that I serve, up in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, is a lovely little New England church, a lot like this one, complete with threadbare pew Bibles, a choice of old and new hymnals, and shadows that date back to the 1850's. There is a little wicker basket in the narthex where the faithful drop "heat offerings" that keep the sanctuary warm during the winter, 5 dollars at a time.

The advent banners, which Brenda and her daughters made back in 1978, are kept in a closet in the parlor until the time comes, every year, to get them out and dust them off.

The back pew has teeth marks along the top ridge, from Sandy's grandson, who she couldn't keep under wraps.

Ah, the poetry of a small church!

I love the part of the services on Sunday morning when we pray for our neighbors, family and friends whose troubles we carry in our hearts. Where else, but in church, do we publicly acknowledge our common need, our care, and our concern. Sure, we also pray for people

suffering in distant lands, and for our leaders to act with wisdom – but this is all done from a deep center of gravity, in this place, and in this community.

You know what I'm talking about!

This, it seems to me, is both profoundly beautiful and incredibly important.

I also welcome the way Peterson's comment takes something commonly assumed to be a problem and turns it into a virtue.

There is no end to the hand-wringing in mainline Protestant denominations about the dwindling number of people in the pews – and, to be sure, it is a matter of concern, but it's worth considering that there is also some real value to being small.

No one in the Gospels or Epistles ever tells us that God only listens to worshippers who call out from crystal cathedrals. To learn God's truth, one need not be sitting in a packed urban church or an arena-style suburban mega-church.

I once had the misfortune of finding myself in a mega-church, and I honestly spent the majority of the time fighting the urge flee. The full Christian Praise Rock Band was cool, and the preacher had a nice haircut, but there was nary a bible to be seen in the place, and not a whiff anywhere, of any actual reverence. If it weren't for the cross up on the altar, I might have mistaken the place for a sports bar, with all the screens everywhere. When it came time to pray, the pastor turned to the biggest screen in the place, and I suppose the lovely picture of sun breaking through the clouds was intended to be God, but I could not suppress the queasy feeling that we were all worshipping a giant TV!

Local and small feels great to me.

That Mega-church can boast of big budgets, nice hair-do's, jumbo-trons, and Rock bands, but that kind of boasting is the boasting in the glory of *this world*.

Paul encouraged us to **boast** in our hope of sharing the Glory of **God**.

Look... I know that local and small also comes with its challenges. You can't pastor a rural New England church for six years without confronting the inevitable, yet somehow unforeseen problems with the fire code, the scary budget shortfalls, and the ever present worry that no young families are coming...

But as scary as those things are – they do not compromise the gorgeous poetry of our essence...

The essence of community... about which I boast...

To gather together

And in doing so, *live into* the truth of Matthew 18:20:

“where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Let us turn now to the passage that we heard from the 16th chapter of John's gospel. Jesus is speaking. The first thing he does is admits to a problem:

I still have many things to say to you, he says, but you cannot bear them now.

The problem appears to be that Jesus has more to teach us, but we're not ready to hear it.

No sooner, does Jesus say this, though, then he declares that this problem has a solution:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth...

OK.

So the Holy Spirit will complete Jesus' teaching?

Kind of, but not exactly.

Listen to this next thing that Jesus says:

“for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears,”

By “he” Jesus is referring to the spirit. So, this line could read like this:

“for the spirit will not speak on its own, but will speak whatever it hears...”

Did you catch that?

Jesus is telling us a pretty remarkable and surprising thing about the nature of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not like Jesus, who taught us through his actions and his parables. Jesus spoke and people listened to him.

We are *still* listening to him!

But apparently, Jesus tells us, the Holy Spirit will *reverse* the dynamic.

The teaching of the Holy spirit will be a *response* to what the Holy spirit *hears*.

We have been listening to God.

Now God listens to us!

I submit to you, this morning, that this “Holy-Spirit-that-listens” is another reason...

To gather together.

It is another reason that we can “**boast** in our hope of sharing the Glory of God.”

For when we gather together, we create something that the Holy Spirit listens to.

We do so naturally.

When we gather together, we create love.

No jumbo-tron, dry ice machine, or praise band required.

When we gather together, we create beloved community.

At this point you may be wondering what planet I just flew in from.

If this guy thinks people create love just by coming to church, he must either be incredibly naive or be living under a rock – probably both.

And if the word “love” means sparkly hearts floating around on a Hallmark card, then yes I’d agree with you and try to find the nearest rock to climb under.

But that is not what I mean when I use the word love. The love that the Holy Spirit is listening for — is not the stuff of unicorns and rainbows and cute chubby cheeked babies floating in clouds. *Forget all that.*

When we were created by God, we were created by love, and for the sake of love.

Love is our essence and our destiny — either we believe this, or we perish. There is nothing naive about love. To *actually* live according to what love requires is nearly impossible.

Love is the greatest challenge that faces humanity.

Look what happened to Dr. King. To Mohandas Gandhi, and of course, to our own beloved Jesus...

It is the hardest thing that we do; the greatest responsibility that we have; the most challenging and subversive idea in human history.

It is, at one and the same moment, what we are made of, and what we are striving toward...

And when we choose

to gather together

In this *spirit* –

We are making an intentional effort to create a world that begins from love.

Not profit...

But love.

Let us pray:

We come O God

All the you’s and the me’s

Come here to form we...

Your we

The we of God.

This is how we try to live into the teachings of Jesus...

We choose

to gather together

So that here, in this place, we can create

Something that the Holy Spirit will listen too.

It's not easy.

We know that.

The prophet Isaiah says "Come let us argue it out..."

And so we come here, not as naive children,

But as wise veterans of life's hard knock,

Faithful still, that we can

learn,

feel,

exercise

And discover

the love that is our destiny

And our one true hope.

This, O God, is why we are people of faith...

It is our why.

Why we gather together

Not to make money

Not to be entertained...

But to find ourselves, once again,

Within a community that begins

And ends in Love...

Amen.