

Sunday, September 23, 2007

COMMUNITY

Amos 8:1-12

God said, "The end has come upon the people, I will no longer ignore their sin. Their songs of praise shall become wailing; the dead bodies shall be many; in every place they shall be cast out in silence."

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy, and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, "When will the worship service be over so we can go back to business? When will the Sabbath end, that we might buy low and sell high, and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we might buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell even the refuse of the wheat?"

God has sworn; "I will never forget any of their deeds. Shall not the land tremble on account of this, and every one who dwells in the land shall mourn.... God says, "I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentations; it will be like the mourning for the lose of an only child, and the end of it like a bitter day."

"Behold, the days are coming," says God, "when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of God. The people shall wander from sea to sea, and from

north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of God, but they shall not find it.they shall fall, and never rise again.”

Acts 4: 32-34

Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which they possessed was their own, but they had everything in common. And with great power they gave their testimony to the resurrection of Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for what they had was distributed to each as they had need.

1 Corinthians 12: 12-14, 24-26

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with the body of Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jew or Greeks, slaves or free—and all have shared of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many...God has so adjusted the body, giving honor to the more vulnerable parts, that there may be no discord in the body, but that all the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Let us pray.....

Community: the community of faith, the human community, the global community, the community of life.

We are social beings who become who we are in relationship: in relationship to other people, in relationship to the environment, in relationship to all creation, in relationship to the divine.

We are a part of the web of life, the inter-connectedness of all being. We can only discover and become our true and fullest selves when we acknowledge this connectedness and seek the paths that serve the common good.

David Cortan, in his book, "The Great Turning: from Empire to Earth Community", says that all species that survive find a place in the web of life that serves the whole and that the great challenge of our species is to find such a place or we will perish.

This scientific understanding from evolutionary biology confirms the wisdom of the prophets. Amos declares that when we seek wealth and power over others, when we create hierarchies that enrich a few while impoverishing many, we create structures that will lead to the death and destruction of everyone and even the web of life itself.

Paul reminds us of our interdependence in his beautiful metaphor of the community as an organism, a body. When one part of the community suffers

then ever part suffers. An injury to one is an injury to all. When on part is honored then all are honored. And a healthy body honors, gives special attention to, the most vulnerable parts.

Empire is a negation of the Gospel!
Capitalism is a negation of the Gospel!

And the Good News of Jesus Christ is that even in the belly of the Beast, even in the heart of the empire, we can create communities that are the seeds of a new world, the leaven and the salt, the transformative agents that will bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old.

Even in the imperial city of Jerusalem where the powers of domination had just executed their friend and teacher, Jesus, a new community could be born that challenged the very foundations of empire and all systems of domination.

Even though this community was destroyed along with the entire city of Jerusalem thirty years later, dozens of other communities dedicated to following the Way of Jesus to birth a new world had been formed in imperial cities throughout the Mediterranean world and extending up the Nile to Ethiopia and over land to India.

And even though the Roman empire co-opted the Bible and Jesus Story and created an imperial church,

they were not able to exterminate or prevent the birth of new communities that followed the Way of Jesus committed to living into a new world of justice and peace.

Our particular tradition within the larger Christian Church or Church Universal, has given special importance to the working of the Spirit through local communities to continually renew the church. For the United Church of Christ the local church community is where the fundamental decision making power is located. It is not in a Synod, or a Presbytery, or a Conference, or a Diocese, or a single leader: minister, bishop or pope. While Synods, presbyteries, conference, dioceses and leaders can make decisions, they cannot impose their decisions on a local community of faith.

We give special importance to the wrestling with scripture, tradition, experience, and reason that happens in community at the local level. We acknowledge and affirm that each and every member of the community is important in our wrestling with scripture, tradition, experience and reason. We are all baptized by one Spirit into one body and we are all responsible for the health of our community. We are all responsible for the common good. This is a part of what we mean when we talk about the "priesthood of all believers."

One of the ways we try to embody this is by having our clergy be members of the local congregation. In churches with Episcopal systems, systems with bishops, the clergy may serve a local church or parish, but their membership is in the diocese, or the conference or the Synod.

In our tradition, joining a local church is a big deal. Joining a local congregation is a serious commitment. In a very profound way, we are putting our very souls in each others care.

Today, Nancy and I are becoming members of this congregation, of this local community of faith. For me this act of joining Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ is more significant than any ritual of ministerial installation. In our ritual of joining, I am declaring that I am casting my lot with you, and you are saying yes to my being a part of you.

In joining Wellington Avenue United Church of Christ I am declaring that even in the face of the judgment pronounced by Amos against our society and nation, I believe that God can use us to be a seed of change in birthing God's realm of Justice and Peace.

May it be so.
Amen