

## Who We Are

January 25, 2009 – Epiphany 3B

Trinity, Highland Park

I have heard youth ministers say over and over again something I believe to be absolutely true: They have reminded me continually that youth and young adults are not the church of tomorrow, they are the church of today. I said that recently to a gathering of teenagers -- Yes, you are the church of today, I said, but what I'm interested in hearing from you is what the church will need to become if you are still going to be part of it tomorrow?

The answers were articulate and thought provoking and very moving to me. Essentially, what I heard these young adults say was that the church doesn't need to be something radically different for them to be part of it ... it will just need to be more and more of the best of what it already is. And what is that? What is it that these teenagers valued most about the church? They spoke of our church's commitment to openness. They said they were part of the church because here they were not judged. Some had chosen this church because they were not asked to "check their brains at the door," they found here an environment that didn't force feed faith to them, but encouraged them to explore their doubts and misgivings. They valued the church when it worked for social justice, when it acted on behalf of the poor. They had very definite ideas about how the church should spend its money ... and it had very little to do with most parish or diocesan budgets I've ever seen: more should go to support youth programs, dollars should support the church's embrace of communications technologies, we need to put more resources into interfaith work. Let's start more new congregations. But the reflection offered by one young woman caught my attention more than anything else. She said, "I love the church and I'll be part of it, because I need a community where I can keep on discovering who I am."

I'll tell you one thing, those teenagers showed me the kind of church I want to be part of.

The poet Wendell Berry defines community like this: The commonwealth and common interests, commonly understood, of people living together in a place, and wishing to continue to do so. A community identifies itself by shared interests and values. And it lives and acts out of the common virtues of trust, goodwill, forbearance, self-restraint, compassion and forgiveness. Truly, it is where human persons discover who they are. If it wants to continue for long as a community, it has to encourage respect for all its members. And it does this, not by coercion or violence, but by formation of its young, and by preserving stories, songs and rituals that tell (among other things) what works and does not work in a given place.

When the reality of community such as this begins to dissolve, private life becomes a sort of reserve in which individuals defend their right to act as they please and attempt to limit or destroy the rights of other individuals to act as they please. Competitiveness we call it. Wendell Berry says again that we have changed from a society whose ideal of justice was trust and fairness among people who knew each other into a society whose ideal of justice is public litigation, breeding distrust even among people who know each other.

And the breakdown of community affects us all. I know the subtle tug of jealousy when one of my sister or brother bishops gets some swell press coverage or something published . I know my own

need to jockey for position, to look good, to win every argument. I want to slug it out and take unambiguous stands like some radio talk show host on all the issues of the day. I think much of the excitement in our national life right now has to do with a call to rediscover our most basic and praise-worthy ideals: community, honor, integrity, service will get us much, much farther than winning at everyone else's expense.

This individualism has what may be its most commonly acceptable form when it comes to our professional lives. Much of what we call our work has taken on a neurotic edge it seems to me. More and more people work themselves to death and sacrifice family, honor, and convictions to "get ahead." Until recently, most of us have understood security to mean socking enough money away to preserve a private lifestyle that we have come to regard as essential. Anyone here feel a little like Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, that the world as we have known it is passing away? One of the benefits of our current economic turmoil just may be the re-examination of what community has come to mean – the rediscovery that we cannot buy our way to happiness, we cannot control security or salvation by our own private efforts.

The church I think our teenagers were describing, the Christian faith when it is true to itself practices another way. A radical way. A call from Jesus himself. I believe in this age of ours the church is being called to remember what it is. I believe the people of God are being called to be not just another stall in the vast American market-place, but another society altogether, offering people the vision of a way through the irresolvable mess of a competitive, scarcity-driven worldview. And I believe this vision of what the church can be is a message women and men in our world are dying to hear. That here is one place in which you do not have to assert yourself at the expense of anyone else. Here you do not have to have your defenses ready and sharpened. Here you can be known and cherished simply for who you are: a child of God for whom Jesus was willing to die. Here you can discover who you really are.

Jesus called his friends out of their workaday world. "Follow me," he said, "And I will make you fish for people." I will show you another way. I will be with you to draw you into real community ... with one another and with the world. And the power of that call and the power of that community has continued – despite centuries of our messing it up. It has continued to this place on this morning, to the baptism we are about to celebrate. Jesus is calling you. Jesus is calling me. He is calling us. I believe he is calling us to be a real community with a message for people who are experiencing disintegration and the vague sense that they are just holding life together. That's the reason for being here at all. That's the reason for all this. We're here to discover a new way to live – a call to move from isolation into relationship, from competitiveness to cooperation, from winning to suffering love, from getting what we can to giving it all up for the sake of Christ. We're here to give ourselves away, to one another and to the world. And to discover in that giving that we are found.

Simon and Andrew, Peter and James and Mary of Magdala and Joanna – none of them knew exactly where the call of Jesus to this new life would lead them. But they answered. They followed him. Jesus doesn't ask any of us to have all the answers, just to follow. That is why we set this table and share this food: the Body and Blood of Jesus. He gives himself to us so that we might know our true identity. We are the Body of Christ, broken and poured out for the life of the world he loves.