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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Fifth Sunday of Easter  
May 15, 2022

Lectionary Year C: John 13:31-35

If you were to think about what a church is known for, you might be surprised at how little God, Christ, or anything related to Christ's teachings comes into the picture. So, in a community with multiple churches, you'll hear each one described according to some outward characteristic. That church has the beautiful pipe organ. That church has the cool stained glass windows. That church has the weird pastor,

And so on and so forth...

In the good ol' U.S. of A., we, too, have fallen into the trap of thinking about churches in terms of a spiritual marketplace, which, without a doubt, is the result of many churches positioning themselves as merchants therein. With the exception of Roman Catholics (until recently), most American Christians tend to "shop around" for the church that best fits their perceived interests, needs, and station in life. Speaking personally, that is how I, as a then-lifelong Lutheran, discovered the Episcopal Church at age eighteen -- so I might argue that "church shopping" isn't entirely bad. But when taken to an extreme, Christianity can become just another consumer good that makes itself either attractive or unattractive by the "products" that it offers or doesn't offer.

Doesn't that seem kind of vulgar and disgusting? Who would think that a church would have to stoop so low as to lure "church shoppers" in with incen-

tives and gimmicks? What kind of theology is one operating with when one takes a by any means necessary approach to evangelism?

Actually, no theology at all! Christianity is full of people who think more in terms of economics than theology. Just as a productive nation likes to boast of its Gross Domestic Product, so too do some churches like to boast of how many people it gets through the door. Pastors of these churches are more like CEOs than pastors, ensuring that the church "business" keeps rolling instead of visiting the sick, writing sermons, or leading Bible studies.

To me, this seems all too un-spiritual, and, dare I say, phony. Don't get me wrong...a lot of church shoppers are lured in by the slick, polished packaging of these religious "products," and find them uplifting, inspiring, and providing a purpose in their lives. But it will be interesting to see what sort of long-term effects this will have. In short, the phenomenon of the church growth movement -- which was the hottest thing on the block in my seminary days -- tends to be very long on performance and spectacle, but very short on substance.

The cumulative effect of this could be devastating. Imagine seeing church-going Christians who are unable to pray the Lord's Prayer or confess their faith with the Apostles' Creed. So what? -- you might say -- who needs all that old crap to memorize and regurgitate? Well, seeing as how our prayers, creeds, and liturgies are, apart from Scripture, the only way for the substance of the Christian faith to be handed down through the centuries in any sort of meaningful way, there are good reasons why we shouldn't discard them!

Moreover, as to my original point, it is good for a church to be known by

something other than some superficial outward characteristic. Let's think of a church that is known by what it believes instead of by beautiful pipe organs, cool stained glass windows, or weird pastors. Let's think, too, of a church that is known by its conformity to the teachings and example of Christ, which is far removed from any notion of religion as a consumer good and the church as a supplier of religious "products."

In John, chapter 13, Jesus says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." This is his new commandment that he issues to his disciples before being handed over to suffering and death. It points to a sort of legacy that Jesus wants them to carry on. And it is grounded in the command to love one another. So if anyone walks by one of their places of gathering, he or she (ideally) won't mention one of their superficial outward characteristics -- no, they will be known by their love for one another.

This is the template, too, for communities of faith such as ours. Going way back to the early church, the theologian Tertullian (155-240 A.D.) remarked, "See how [these Christians] love one another." Our witness is best transmitted through the ages through the things we do together -- sharing a meal (the Eucharist), praying and singing (the liturgy), and living according to the command of Christ (love one another). But none of this is possible if we hate each other's guts! Because of love, we can live in unity, harmony, and authenticity, and let that be our witness to even the most casual passerby.

When Tertullian remarked, "See how [these Christians] love one another," he may have had a rosy, idealized view of the church, as squabbles and divisions

in Christian communities predated him, as evidenced by the issues the apostle Paul dealt with in his ministry during the first century. And today, we know that infighting among congregations and denominations is as widespread as ever. I continue to lift up in prayer our neighbors in the United Methodist Church, who stand at the precipice of schism in their denomination. Dealing with matters calmly, trustingly, and lovingly seems to have become quite difficult these days...

Dealing with matters angrily, dishonestly, and hatefully must be more "fun" or something!

But instead of "fun," how about acting in accordance with Christ's command? That would fit exquisitely into that which Christ wanted his disciples to be known by -- their love for one another. Put another way, you can have all the beautiful pipe organs, cool stained glass windows, and slickly packaged religious "products" you want, but if you don't have love, you're not going to make it.

Witness all the churches that have fought, competed, and sold themselves to death. One of my favorite cautionary tales is that of the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. Once an institution of Sunday morning religious broadcasting across the country with Dr. Robert Schuller's Hour of Power television program, its ministry is now a shadow of its former self and the famous "Crystal Cathedral" is now Christ Cathedral and actually is the seat of a bishop -- the Roman Catholic Bishop of Orange. (I continue to be baffled by how many people don't know the real meaning of the word "cathedral.") A big part of the Crystal Cathedral's demise, though, was due to a lot of these

things I've been talking about. But on the other hand, how many churches have loved themselves to death, in sincere, outwardly-directed love? How many, through their genuine commitment to Christ's example and witness, have closed their doors?

I'm guessing not very many. Where there is love, there is commitment. Where there is commitment, there is ministry. And where there is ministry, there is a church. It's not rocket science, but it's easier said than done.

Fortunately, we have a Lord who loves us infinitely more than we could ever love on our own. In a world where people are motivated by either a carrot or a stick, God gives us a carrot, with the understanding that good news will bring more good out of us than bad news. So we go forth -- freed from sin by Jesus Christ -- to love and serve him in our daily lives, returning on the Lord's Day to be refreshed and renewed in this place.

And perhaps, when somebody drives by, that person will know us by our love for one another.

Amen.