

A MUSCULAR FAITH

September 4, 2011

Larry: a week ago last Friday, you and David Brown and John Shier came home after a week of hard work – I suspect a pretty long week of hard work – on the Pine Ridge Reservation among the Oglala Lakota Nation. You tell me, Larry, that your work was installing trailer skirting on what are probably mansions in that place...and building outhouses...and running electrical lines. And the other word that Larry shared with me is that every day the temperature on the reservation soared above 100 degrees.

When I arrived at church yesterday morning, Bruce Shafer was in the Courtyard Garden and Joan Robb was in the Biblical Garden. They were working separately but equally, doing pretty much the same thing: digging, and weeding, and trimming.

These are just two of the latest examples of the faith that is the soul and the substance of this congregation...this church that has as its motto for its hundred and seventy-fifth anniversary: ***God's Love in Action*** – or maybe we could say it: ***Don't just stand there or sit there...do something!***

Our faith is a muscular faith because it's a faith that takes muscles to put it into action, to reach up and live out the good news of God's love. And we've done that, and we continue to do that in so many ways in this congregation: through Habitat for Humanity, and Jubilee House, and the Ecumenical Partnership for Housing...through the Waitzmann Housing Project, and St. John's Homeless Shelter, and Souper Cooks...through the Howe Neighborhood Family Resource Center, and the AIDS Resource Center and JOSHUA.

Ours is a muscular faith. We put muscle to what we believe! It's outward-bound. Our faith is externally expressed. For us, scripture is the manifesto for social change, and it's the manual for how to get it done. With this kind of muscular faith that we live, we pray not only with our mouths and in our heads, but with our hands and our feet. The focus of our work is out there...outside of ourselves...beyond me. And that means that perspiration is holy water when it changes lives. It also means that body odor is incense that is sweet in the nostrils of our God when it makes a better world.

This kind of faith is tangible. It's a faith that has results that we can see and touch. They're particular, and they're specific, and they're visible. As James writes so very pointedly:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

That's a muscular faith, an outward-bound faith, a faith that's expressed beyond us. But, you know, there's a danger in that kind of outward-bound faith. The danger is that it is external...that it separates faith from me...that it objectifies the needs of the world and distances us from others...sometimes in such a way that we get disconnected from what's going on inside

of ourselves. Difficulties, evil: well, that's not us. That's out there. And with this kind of a muscular faith, sometimes our activity keeps us so busy that our faith no longer touches our hearts.

The opposite of an outward-bound faith of external expression is an inward-bound faith that has an internal expression. In this kind of faith, scripture is not a manifesto or a manual. It's devotion and inspiration. It's a mantra. It's words to be memorized and repeated. In this kind of faith, work is focused inside. It's an inward journey. And the work is the disciplines of meditation and contemplation. Holy water is the water blessed for baptism, and incense is what is burned so that it rises up like fragrant prayers in the nostrils of our God. In this kind of faith, pilgrimage matters and, you know, the little pilgrimage of a labyrinth also matters because it takes us on a journey; a journey that helps us find ourselves as we seek God.

As the gospel of Mark records:

In the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

That's an inward faith. Or, as St. Augustine wrote:

Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.

That's an inward-bound, internal faith.

Outward-bound...inward-bound...and then there's a third way; a third way that faith finds its expression in our lives. And that third way is relational. How do we connect, up close, with others? How do we build and nurture community that is our daily experience?

Now, friends, in the real world, that's not always easy. Snoopy once famously said: ***I love humanity; it's people I can't stand!*** And that's because, you know, ***humanity*** is a concept...but ***people – individuals – Marlene, and Richard, and Vern, and Larry, and Deb, and Carol, and Avia*** – you are all real, and particular, and unique. And we, all of us, have our glories and our challenges. Humanity is a concept. People...individuals: that's reality.

Just now, I'm struggling with a relationship with a friend. That relationship is broken. I don't know why. And my friend isn't telling. Do any of you have that experience, now or ever? Have you ever had that experience...ever: broken relationships...strained relationships?

Today, Jesus offers us a very particular and specific strategy for dealing with our relationships when they're broken. That strategy has four steps. First, go to that person alone and confront them privately, and directly, and be honest. If that doesn't work, then take one or two other members of your community and go back, and once again confront that person directly, and compassionately and honestly. If that doesn't work, what's the third step? Take the matter to the whole community. And, if that doesn't work, Jesus says, treat the person as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Now, at first blush, that last step, that fourth step – treat that person as a Gentile and a tax collector – sounds harsh. It sounds like Jesus is saying, 'just get rid of them because they're no

good.’ But then when we remember how Jesus viewed and treated Gentiles and tax collectors; how His ministry was all about including Gentiles and eating and spending time with tax collectors...then the complexion of this story changes almost a hundred and eighty degrees. What Jesus is saying when he says, ‘treat them as Gentiles and tax collectors,’ is that they no longer have any responsibility in the community or to it, but the community is responsible to offer them constant hospitality and care, and to always be inviting and including them, no matter what they do.

Jesus will not let us let go. Jesus will not bless any exclusion that we institute. Each person is precious, says Jesus. Each person is a child of God. And because that’s so, we have to face each other and do whatever we can do to set right what has been made wrong because, you know, we are all the poorer when our relationships disintegrate. We are all the poorer when we are alienated from even one.

Well, that’s not easy. That’s not easy, especially when the community is one of voluntary relationships. It’s easier for us to just find another place...or to get another job...or to cut off communication...or to stop talking...or to avoid at all costs the person with whom we have difficulty or, in this age, just to unfriend them on Facebook. It’s easier to go to another church, yet relational faith doesn’t take the easy way out. The Apostle Paul says to us this morning:

Owe no one anything – owe no one anything – except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this one word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. You know, friends, the Christian faith isn’t so difficult because it’s so complicated. The truth, of course, is that we complicate it to make it easy. The Christian faith is difficult because it’s so very simple. There are no loopholes; there are no exceptions.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. One command, one command alone: love one another. The word in Greek is ***agape***, and it means pre-emptive, initiatory, persistent love that stops at nothing. Owe no one anything...except that ***agape*** is everything! As Jesus says in the gospel of John to his disciples:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Relational faith doesn’t simply look outside. Nor does it only look inside. It looks around. It looks around. Its focus is near and close; as close as we are one to another in this room. Its focus is on those who belong to us and to whom we belong in community. And, of course, as the book that Peggy read for the kids just a little while teaches us, we can’t ever achieve world peace if we can’t achieve peace and harmony with each other. Sharing pizza maybe, but not gossip, and rumors, and factions, and cliques and certainly not the maliciousness of suspicion and supposition.

Tom Filardo is almost ten years older than I am. Tom did his undergraduate work at Notre Dame and his medical school at Northwestern. And now he's retired in Ohio. His sister was my first baby sitter. She was my baby sitter until she died at the Mayo Clinic more than 50 years ago following open heart surgery. Tom, and his sister, and their parents: they were our next door neighbors and we were very close friends. But, there was this little property dispute – a border skirmish about where the property line really was – and, because of that, our families stopped communicating altogether. The relationship died.

Last week I found Tom on Facebook, and I sent him a friend request. And it wasn't long before he answered it. So, we're friends – at least on Facebook – after more than 40 years. And he looks like his dad, but he's got his mother's smile.

Relational faith may not soak a shirt or tone our abs like an external faith does under the summer broiler of the South Dakota sun. Nevertheless, it is very hard work because it stretches the hardest working muscle in the human body – it stretches the heart. And my guess, Larry, is that the most important work that you, and John and David did on the Pine Ridge Reservation was to build relationships; relationships of care, and dignity, and resilience and respect, and yes, love with your new friends, the Oglala Lakota people.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. Friends, you have an assignment this week. Here's your homework: Do whatever you can to mend a broken relationship before next Sunday.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. That's not just a warm feeling or an idealistic platitude. It's an imperative command. Repairing and renewing relationships: that is a muscular faith! Amen.

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