

## Beloved & Baptized: Now What? (Presence)

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent - February 28, 2010, Leonard Eberhart

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18; Psalm 27; Philippians 3: 17-4:1; Luke 13: 31-35

The nightmare of every parent became real a month ago with the breaking news of Jon Lacina's disappearance. There was the usual prompt response by police and ISU Security, joined by legions of students and other volunteers to search for him. Not surprisingly a Facebook site "Help Find Jon Lacina" appeared on Jan 30 to raise awareness and connect the search in a way we didn't have a few short years ago. Jon's family, friends, indeed the communities of Grinnell and Ames as well as surrounding areas all found themselves feeling very helpless.

Soon I began to hear about how people here in Grinnell were offering support by preparing and delivering meals to Jon's family. Messages were sent that individuals were ready to personally come and surround Tom and Alesia, the distraught parents and brother Joe during their time of anguish. It's not unlike other times in life when "being with" someone is the most one can do. It's called the ministry of presence. It may not feel like it's adequate at the time, but in retrospect the recipients of this gift of presence say it was very comforting and much more valuable than a lot of empty words we sometimes attempt to offer as a poor substitute.

Today I'm continuing a five part sermon series on the five expressions of our membership covenant. It is my hope and prayer that by thinking about these dimensions of our membership covenant we will be better prepared to hear and act on God's dream for us as a church and a people. The promise we make is to "support the ministry of the UMC through our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness" (this fifth dimension was added at the last General Conference). So today we'll spend some time with what is included in our commitment to be present.

At face value "supporting the ministry of the UMC with our presence" simply refers to showing up. One of the obvious places we do this is to be present in worship. St. Paul illustrated the value and power of doing this in his letter to the Corinthians, "*the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body.*" (I Corinth 12:14-5) The obvious point is that all members of the body are needed in order for the whole to be complete.<sup>1</sup>

While this admonition could be taken as a bald faced urging to increase worship attendance, it's much more. The central focus here is encouragement of an essential spiritual practice and the value of active presence with others who have also gathered for the same purpose. In our consumer culture we too often only center in

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<sup>1</sup>"Promises to Keep: A Study of the Meaning of Membership in the UMC", p. 15-17

on what's in it for me. The distinct possibility is that my being present in worship may on any given Sunday do more to encourage another person than I'll ever actually receive. Hands and feet, though different, belong to one another - need each other.

I'm constantly amazed at the complexity of people's lives. Families with school age children almost need an organizational consultant to help them stay on track with none stop activities that begin in early morning and continue through late evening. I remember what it was like to have two daughters in their teens. The opportunities for trying different things were almost endless. While I was grateful for the possibilities, I kept wondering at what cost? We had a number of conversations about extra curricular involvement. Yes, all these options provided healthy ways to try out lots of experiences, but if too many of them were attempted at once, what would have to be sacrificed. Although we pretty much agreed, I did have to be the parent.

The guiding principle in our household enabled the girls to chose to engage in two extra curricular activities at a time. I insisted that they also continue piano lessons until they began to have fun playing. At that point they could chose whether they would continue lessons. Of course it was expected that attendance at worship, SS and youth group would be part of every week. The girls would often slip into the sanctuary with wet hair during the Call to Worship or the first hymn, but they usually got there. They knew if they were late, they'd get teased by 'Usher Tom.'

Fulfilling our pledge of presence takes practice, intentionality, encouragement and understanding why it's important. No one can just show up at the Olympics and win a gold medal without lots of preparation and a clear goal in mind. The writers of "Promise to Keep" say it this way "Without the commonality of Christ between each member there may be no reason for us to know one another, or be known."<sup>2</sup> It's because we're 'Christian' - followers of Jesus that brings us here. We come to worship to have our own souls nourished, but also to participate in aiding the nourishment of other's souls.

Diane and I finally got to see the movie Avatar this week. I'll admit when I first heard about it, I wasn't very interested in seeing what I thought was an adult animated cartoon. The underlying themes soon override the animatronics. There is the classic confrontation between the empire of violence and the prevailing balance of life among the Na'vi . The way of the empire is the assertion of vast force and power over against an indigenous people content with the basics unified by a life force. The contrast is stark: brut power and force verses life giving relationship.

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<sup>2</sup>"Promises to Keep: A Study of the Meaning of Membership in the UMC", p. 16. I'm very grateful for the faithful work done by Bishop Gregory Palmer, the Reverends Scott Kober and Jill Sanders and their insightful writing in *Promises to Keep: A Study of Membership in the United Methodist Church* as a primary resource for this sermon series: "Beloved & Baptized: Now What?"

We deal with these opposing alignments all the time: relationship verses . . . . It may not be brut power and force that distracts us, but there are lots of seductive distractions that tempt us to short change being present with one another. So when I encouraged you to be in prayer last week, asking God to bring you in contact with a person with whom you could have a meaningful interchange, perhaps letting the person know you've missed seeing them in worship, this was NOT a mere self serving exercise. The reason these stones were erected upon one another in the late 1890s was to provide a house of prayer. This sanctuary was established so that individuals could come and go from here for the purpose of being present with one another to be in prayer.

St. Paul said: *“Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, . . . live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”* (Philippians 3: 17-20) Whose example do you follow as a disciple of Jesus? For whom are you that living example of Christ? How do you intentionally nurture that relationship?

For a decade or so we watched the TV series “Cheers” a nondescript bar that continued to attract the regulars because it was a place “where everybody knows your name!” In Avatar the identity of the empire was it's ability to impose indiscriminate shock and awe while the people of Avatar drew their strength from being connected to the life force all around them. The question of identity came up often for Jesus too. In his baptism the voice is heard: *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* (Luke 3:22) Last week the tempter wanted Jesus to offer his allegiance to the tempter rather than to God. Jesus' response was firm, identifying himself as a follower of God and God alone.

In today's reading Jesus deals with the religious legalists. When the Pharisees report back to Herod, it will be clear whose voice Jesus considers to be important. It isn't Herod's. Jesus is listening to God. Jesus' identity - Beloved Son - can never be taken away from him. God's word on this is permanent.

We also wrestle with the matter of identity. Ask any teenager about how things can change overnight. The popular person today can be the outcast tomorrow. The adult world is not so different. The relentless news cycle that thrusts a person into the limelight one moment can just as quickly leave her/him behind in obscurity. These fickle pronouncements are usually based on shallow criteria: fashion, skin color, political alignments . . . . It's distressingly easy to forget our true identity - that each of us is a beloved child of God. This is what is true about us no matter what the clamoring messages around us say. This is an identity that can't be taken from us. It's an identity we claim through our baptism and endures forever!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>*The Clergy Journal*, N/D 2009, p. 26

So if living out our membership covenant of “presence” means we need to show up, it needs to be very clear that we aren’t finished upon arrival. We likely find ourselves in the faith community because of someone else’s hospitality. What sort of hospitality then is expected of us? Well, thinking more deeply about that will have to be the topic in the weeks ahead. Stay tuned for future reflections: Beloved & Baptized: Now What?

## Beloved & Baptized: Now What? (Presence)



### Questions to Ponder during Lent.

1. How can just being there count as presence?
2. What makes practicing the **Rule of 3** (*Not talking to friends and other members for three minutes before visiting with a guest or someone you don't know*) and the **Circle of Ten** (*greeting everyone who comes within ten feet*) so valuable and how does one overcome the barriers for practicing these rules?
3. What barriers are there which keep you or others from attending worship? In what way might we express appreciation to those who do come to worship and encourage those who are absent from worship - letting them know they are truly missed?

### Engaging in Ministry of Presence Practices

1. Take time to actively listen to someone close to you. Who do you need to be present with this week?
2. Encourage at least one person who hasn't been regular in worship to join you this week. Invite someone who hasn't been to worship to come this Sunday. Consider offering a ride or meeting them upon arrival so you can host and sit with the person.
3. Reflect on your worship attendance, does your record honor Christ?
4. Continue diligently practicing your prayer life. Ask God to sensitize you to persons who need your ministry of presence.