

Salt, Covenants and Rummage Sales
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Sunday, Sept. 26, 2010
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture:
Numbers 18:19
Matthew 5:13

How many of you remember – or played a part in – the giant, church-wide rummage sale we organized a couple of years ago?

It came soon after the rebirth of this church. The congregation was even smaller than it is now. We had even less money than we do now. But then, as now, your heart for mission could hardly be contained.

What we all did have were possessions we weren't using. So, over a few weeks, we gathered hundreds of items from our homes – furniture to fixtures, computers to cookware, gas grills to golf gear and more. Under the able leadership of Maggie Devries and others, we transformed our unused gym into a retail operation that William Henry Belk, to whom the building is dedicated, would have admired.

On a hot, summer Saturday, we opened the doors and by the end of the day we had raised \$3,500 to support mission work in our city. That roughly doubled our missions budget that year.

Our budget for justice and mission work has grown since then – and we intend for it to continue to grow. Meanwhile, the ample square footage of our campus is filling with the sounds of new friends and neighbors in need. The laughter of Latino preschoolers fills the hallways of our Price Building in the mornings. And, at night in the new shelter upstairs, you can hear the tired sighs of our homeless guests as they rest in one of those comfortable rooms you all created. By God's hand, we've come a long way from our yard sale two years ago. Yet, there is a sense that we are still just getting started. Our creator and redeemer is surely not finished with us yet.

I was reminded of our yard sale as I read a book that any student of the church would find interesting. It's called The Great Emergence, by Phyllis Tickle. She says that, every now and then, the Church itself – not Caldwell church but the Church – does what we did, but on a far grander and more sweeping scale. Her focus is not what to do with that old armchair in the basement or the clothes that no longer fit. Her focus is really on

what's happening to Christianity amid the dizzying upheaval and hopeful signs of promise that we're experiencing here in the 21st century.

“About every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale,” she says, quoting an Anglican Bishop.¹

About every five hundred years, the Church sorts itself out, she says, sometimes in painful ways, but always in ways that clear space for something new. Then, because it is fresh with energy and hope and promise, that new thing spreads and the Church is stronger for it.

What we have been blessed with here at Caldwell is a microcosm of that, an example of God's providence no one could have foreseen. But, again, we are only a small-scale example. As Tickle writes, this process of rummage sales clearing space for new things has been playing out on a global scale for eons.

About five hundred years ago from today, the Protestant Reformation broke away from the Catholic church, giving birth to many new denominations and ways of practicing faith, including Presbyterianism. About five hundred years before that was the Great Schism, an argument between the Roman leader Constantine and the Pope, the leader of the Catholic Church. One side wanted to practice Christianity in Greek, the other Latin. One wanted leavened bread in the Eucharist, the other unleavened. But the real debate was about how Christ is present in communion, and thus in our lives.

Five hundred years before that was the great debate over the nature of Christ – was he human, divine or some combination? Five hundred years before that was the birth of Christianity, a split-off from Judaism. Five hundred years before that was the Great Diaspora, the era when Judaism spread beyond Judea, on its way to becoming a world religion. Five hundred years before that was the shift from judges ruling over God's people to a line of kings, most manifest in the line of King David. So, we see how the pattern holds.

Usually these points of transformation, these rummage sales, erupt out of a combination of dialogue and turmoil within the religious order, while, at the same time, tectonic shifts and advancements are underway in the larger society.

¹ P. 16

In the end, though, the central issue always comes out to be the same: What do God's people claim as the authority behind their faith? In other words, what do people of faith claim as the final source of truth?

After wrestling with that question – throwing out some old ideas and bringing in some new -- the outcome has always been the same. The process takes decades. But eventually it produces a fresh expression of faith in God that speaks to a new era.

That, Tickle and so many others say, is where we stand today. This metamorphosis – we might even call it God's laboratory – is evident across the religious landscape. From the mega-churches to the new popularity of house churches. From the impressive growth of the Pentecostal movement to the blue-jean-wearing, powerpoint-and-rock-and-roll churches. It's in denominational in-fighting over social issues such as homosexuality in America, which is really only an echo of the same argument over the ordination of women and the full inclusion of blacks. It's at work in the explosion of Christianity south of the equator. It is even manifest in the last gasps of thousands of small churches in inner cities and rural villages that couldn't – or didn't - embrace change soon enough.

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What, pray tell, does any of this have to do with us on this rainy Sunday in Charlotte, North Carolina? How does it relate or inform our season of discipleship, a time when we look deep within ourselves to find what we have to give to others in response to God's love? Defining what discipleship means for me is hard enough, we might say, without trying to do so while also figuring out the future of the Church.

Two thousand years ago – that's four five-hundred year cycles – a wandering Jew, the son of common carpenter, began a ministry. As written in the Gospel of Matthew, he “went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.”²

Crowds soon began to follow him. Then one day he went up on a mountain and preached a sermon that turned the world on its head.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

² Matthew 4:23

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

And so it went. Every reality that was assumed as the way of the world reversed, debunked. The low held high and assured with Christ’s promise: “Rejoice and be glad.”

Then Jesus turned his attention to those who had been following him. By then, it was not just the hand-picked few he had found by the lake and elsewhere. It was a larger group, a community early in the process of formation, a community that decades later would be branded as Christians, but who were first known as disciples.

“You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus said to those first disciples, “but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.”

These are familiar words, at least some of them, to those with even a passing familiarity with scripture. We’ve all borrowed them, at one time or another, to describe a friend or acquaintance known for being real and authentic. “That Bob, he sure is the salt of the earth,” we say.

But to Christ’s first listeners they held layers of meaning that related to their first-century lives far better than our 21st century lives.

First, Jesus was making a statement about what it meant to be in community. For centuries, salt had signified loyalty and fidelity. More important, salt symbolized making a covenant, a lasting promise built on mutual commitment. We heard that in our reading from the Book of Numbers that mentions salt in reference to the lasting covenant with God that connected one generation to the next.

Perhaps the most essential meanings of salt, though, came from its essential role to life and living in that era. Salt had very practical uses, as a seasoning and a purifier of foods and meats. Most of all, salt was used to preserve food. Salt was necessary to living. It was literally a life-giving substance.

So, what was Jesus saying to his disciples as he concluded the sermon on the mount? In essence, he said:

“I charge you to live in the world, not to run from it, to give it life only as my followers can. You are now part of something far bigger than you can imagine. Each of you is called into mission in the world, a mission the world will question and criticize.

“As salt, part of your role is to purify this tradition we are starting, to remind all who are part of it what it means to follow me, to do as I do, as best you can. I also charge you to be a covenant community, loyal to each other, through thick and thin. Most of all, I charge you with preserving what we are all now a part of. It won’t always be easy. But I will always be with you.”

“Whatever you do, as disciples, do not lose your integrity and your authenticity, your character and calling. The role I give you today is like nothing else the world will provide. Once it is lost, the world will cast you aside, like salt that has lost its taste and become useless. But as long as you live as salt in the world, God will always have a need, a role and a calling for you.”

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Every five hundred years or so, the Church has a giant rummage sale. It goes into the deepest corners of its attic and the dankest nooks of its basement. It hauls everything out into the front yard.

“Let us look at all of our stuff in the light of day,” the church says, “and let us take stock. What was just trendy? What seemed like a good idea at the time, but now seems rather worthless?”

“On the other hand, what do we need to live. What do we have that stands the test of time? What still has meaning to us? What gives us comfort? What still lights up the dark night? What heals us? What inspires us? What feeds us and sustains us?”

“And, what connects us with those first disciples, the ones whom Jesus called “salt” as the sun began to set on what had been such a memorable, life-changing day there on the side of the mount?”

I tend to agree with Phyllis Tickle, the author. Everything I see and read and sense confirms that we are in the middle of one of those pivotal times of transitions, one of those big church rummage sales. It’s a time when we people of faith sort through who we are, why we are here and what we are called to do.

That is as true on the global scale as it is on the individual. Today, as part of our season of discipleship, you come having asked some of those same questions. Why am I here? Why am I in this place? What do I have to give – in my time and my talent – in response to all that God has given me? What does my life mean to the one who gave his life for

me? What does it mean to be the salt of the earth – and how can I be that substance in the world, to preserve what Jesus started, to give life to others?

If, as Tickle says, the central question in every pivotal moment for the Church is one of authority, this question of what is our final source of truth, I wonder if the life of discipleship isn't at least part of that consideration. Yes, of course, there is authority in scripture as the Word written. Yes, authority rests in the life, death, resurrection and teachings of Christ, the Word incarnate. Yes, there is authority in God in the Holy Spirit, alive and active every day.

But can't we also locate authority – at least in some aspect - in what it means to be a disciple, the act of responding with our lives and taking our place in that long line of disciples that traces back to the foot of the mount where Jesus called the first of them salt?

It is as simple – and as momentarily challenging – as that, to claim and live into a life of learning about God by doing with and for others, and to do so in the name of our savior, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.