

September 14, 2008

Texts: Exodus 3: & Acts 6:1-7

Don't fence me In!

In the passage that we read to day from Acts we have a story of the early church's attempt at structure. Actually we could call it a reorganization since Jesus had given this movement a bit of organizational structure when he called the 12 disciples. This was certainly not the first attempt at organizing, or reorganizing a group of God's people. In the Old Testament we find lots of monarchies, federations, and even periods of anarchy. There were lots of one man rules (Kings, Judges and Prophets) and some two men rule (Moses and Aaron) and even a one woman rule (Judge Deborah). In Acts, the time of the Apostles has arrived and with the new times, different demands call for a new kind of leadership and a new type of structure. Though this event may not be as nearly as dramatic as tongues of fire, this day, in my estimation is just as important.

There are at least two critical revelations that we should learn from this passage as we consider our own attempts at restructuring. The first is that each group as well as each individual has limits. The Apostles have come to a realization that they cannot do it all. And, neither can we! If one leader, or even one committee tries to do everything, then nothing gets done well, and eventually the entire group will suffer and the leaders will eventually burn out.

The second insight is related to the first and that is that there are always other folks, "full of the Spirit and wisdom," who can be empowered to address the needs of the church. The Spirit gives abundantly and some folks have been endowed with special interests or passions or skills that will specifically address the ministry needs of the congregation. There are many crucial tasks and many important roles to fill, but God has promised to send us what, and whom, we need. Like the community in Acts, we need those who can dedicate themselves to the study scripture and to prayer and we also need those who will care for the needs the poor and the vulnerable.

Today's passage also gives us at least two indicators of whether or not an organizations structure is the Spirits doing. The first is found in the process itself, in the passage we read, "What was said pleased the whole community..." Now this sounds an awful lot like "consensus" to me? It doesn't say that a mere majority were happy, but that the "whole" community was pleased. So the Spirit always works to unify the community.

Another proof of the Spirit's presence is that the word of God spreads and the number of disciples increase! A particular Anabaptist reading of this passage

would quickly draw attention to a crucial distinction here due to the use of the term discipleship. There is a critical distinction to be made between mere numerical growth and a growth in discipleship, since numbers may actually decrease as some find the commandments of Jesus just too difficult to follow. This distinction should also be made when we consider what is called Jesus' "great commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, ... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matt 28: 19 & 20a)

(Ask Susie to come forward) For this years annual assembly of the MSMC, each congregation was asked to bring a symbol that expressed the Holy Spirit work in their midst. The variety of symbols collected by the end of the weekend was both creative and beautiful as it was arranged on the stage and it was both also incredibly inspiring to see how the Spirit is at work with in our conference. But, for months, prior to the assembly I agonized over what would be an appropriate symbol to carry with me. Finally I turned to Susie for help and after many long and grueling conversations (well... maybe two phone calls the week of the conference) Susie did received an inspiration! And I'll let her explain it to you...

... In one of our initial conversations I wanted to take all the pieces of paper hanging on our walls as a representation of the many many gifts the spirit has endowed us with! Look at them, just look at all those gifts that surround us and animate us! Awesome! But I think Susie's idea of jewels makes the point even better!

But we were also asked to share a symbol of our hope for the Spirit's work to come. And this time I got my way, my choice of a symbol of what I'm hoping the Spirit will do in the future is a hammer! You see, as I said to those gathered a conference, glass jars filled with sparkling gems are sure pretty to look at up on a shelf or as something to keep our papers from blowing off our desks. However, I do not believe that that is the purpose the Spirit gives us these gifts! The Spirit gives to each of us as the Spirit chooses but not so we can stand around in stupefied admiration, but with the intention that we use them. Sparkling jewels do little stored away on a shelf or hidden in a safe, God wants them to be let loose- to be set free! Pray with me, that the Holy Spirit will come like a hammer and break open whatever limits we use to keep them unused or shut up away from a world that so desperately needs their beauty!

Folks, as you know, today we will consider a proposal regarding how we organize ourselves here at FCMF. And in the immortal words of Richard M. Nixon, I want to be "perfectly clear," I do not really give a rat's pattootee what our structure looks like! And I am not here this morning to try and convince you one way or another. Additionally, there is nothing inevitable about what is being presented to you. Though several of us have given a lot of time to it, folks like Jerry, Susie, Irene, Eliza and others who are certainly full of it (full of the Spirit and wisdom

that is), don't pass this resolution in order to avoid hurting our feelings. Again let me be clear, it really doesn't matter because our structure is not what is the most important in the end. Structures are like rituals or buildings are things made by humans and so are not holy or divine. And neither is "change" or "more of the same" necessarily the Holy plan of the Divined. But God does desire faithful disciples, God does want holy people. How we get there is simply not as important. First and foremost we must serve God and not structures or even our traditions. In the end it is crucial that our structure, or the building we own, must serve us and empower us to love God and to serve those whom God loves -our neighbor.

I guess that organization and therefore structures are inevitable. Even if one states categorically that "we are unstructured!," they are revealing a form of organization. And so the key point is to not argue the existence of structure but to carefully analyze how it enables us for ministry. Now I wonder if most of us when we think of structures don't imagine things like fences or boxes, things that places limits us. limits on our gifts and even our hopes! But I want to pose the question, can an organizational structure actually set us free? As you consider today's proposal I want you to consider this ... can the way we organize ourselves here at FCMF actually bring to life and empower what the Spirit has already placed in our midst? Only vote in the affirmative this morning if the proposed structure helps us to break free and to turn loose our precious gifts! And only cast your vote in the affirmative if you are ready and willing to commit yourself to using your gifts joyfully and with out reservation to build up this motley little group and to then break out into this troubled old world!

We may stumble as we work things out and we will certainly fail (probably more than once) and we may even decide after the trial period that we must... (gasp!) RESTRUCTURE AGAIN! But our measure of success is the presence of the Spirits with us and this too will become evident. It will be evidenced not by our perfection or by happiness, but by a deep and growing satisfaction. Folks may, or may not, start busting down our doors to get in this place, but that is not our goal. No the goal is growth in discipleship. The growth of people willing to teach and to follow all that God has commanded - yes every bloody thing that God has called us to do!