



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – May 3, 2009

Blest Be the Tie That Binds

The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

Psalm 133

¹How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
²It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
³It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

John 14:7-18

⁷If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”⁸Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.”⁹Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’¹⁰Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.¹¹Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.¹²Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.¹³I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.¹⁴If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

¹⁵“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.¹⁷This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.

John 17:20-23

²⁰“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you,

*may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

You and I share a 275 year tradition of pulling together in times of trouble. 250 years ago French soldiers and their Native American allies were burning out colonial settlers, and we pulled together to send our young men North to protect our homes. 80 years ago, our economy spiraled into a depression, and we pulled together to take a mortgage on church property to provide work for our unemployed members. Eight years ago, planes slammed into the Twin Towers, and we pulled together to organize relief supplies for the displaced. It is what we do. We pull together in times of trouble.

Today, right now, is one of those times. Every single one of us shares some measure of pain and uncertainty unleashed by our current recession. Many of us have suffered devastating losses of jobs, of savings, of retirement funds. But what would “pulling together” look like in the midst of these particular troubled times?

The answer isn’t as easy as you might think. It’s not as simple as rushing troops to the frontier or boots to ground zero. This time the pain is universal, and yet we seem to be suffering our hardships in mostly private ways. This time, we are all facing a common threat, and yet our hardships seem to press us toward awkward isolation rather than common cause.

Your church staff and lay leaders have generated a long list of possible initiatives, but it is hard to discern which initiatives we should take on as a church and which we should leave to others. What are our priorities as a congregation?

I don’t intend to discuss specific proposals this morning. Instead, I want to invite you into the conversation. And I want to invite you into the

conversation by reflecting together on our central mission as a congregation. And I want to start by telling two very short stories.

The first story comes from the Netherlands in 1939. The Nazis had invaded Holland, and a church gathered to hear Dutch theologian Hendrik Kramer speak. When Kramer opened the meeting for questions, one man rose and said, "Our Jewish neighbors are disappearing from their homes. What must we do?" Kramer answered, "I cannot tell you what to do. I can tell you who you are. If you know who you are, you will know what to do."a

The second story comes from New Haven, two days ago. I was at a Yale Divinity School Board of Advisors discussion on the future of Christian congregations. If there was a consensus in our discussions, it was something like this: there is no question but that Christian congregations will have a robust future: but it might not be our congregations. In these times, when Christian faith can no longer be assumed, when Christian understanding can no longer be expected to come in the church door as part of the prevailing culture, our congregations will not survive unless we get better at telling the seekers who do come what we believe.

Who are we? What do we believe? These are important questions at all times, but I want to suggest this morning that by returning to these touchstones, we will be better able to decide together what we should do - how we should pull together in this time of economic suffering.

So, let me begin the conversation by sharing two things I believe down in the marrow of my bones - two things I believe not because I have read them in books but because I have experienced them with you in my office, at your hospital bedsides and in your homes.

Here is the first thing I believe. I believe stuff breaks down. I believe that there is some force in creation that breaks things down and drives things apart.

Scientists teach us that the universe is subject to forces of entropy, forces that break down order and drive toward chaos. Slowly but surely, the forces of entropy break down everything, even solar systems, planets, mountain ranges, tree trunks.

But I do not believe stuff breaks down because I have read about entropy; I believe it because I have seen these forces at work when I sit with you during times of suffering. It seems that every single form of suffering visited upon us threatens to wound us twice. The first wound is the direct impact of the misfortune: we are diagnosed with cancer, we lose our job, we are betrayed by our spouse. The pain of this first wound is immediate and largely unavoidable.

But a second wound often follows the first. The second wound is how our suffering is compounded by these powers of separation. There is something about the wounds of adversity that threaten friendships, families and even congregations with powers of separation, alienation and isolation.

Here is an example. The doctor gives us a diagnosis. That is the first wound. We are stunned. Everything is suddenly different. We reach for our coat numbly. We make our way out to the street, and as we step into the sunlight and look up at the traffic and passersby ... they just don't seem to get it. They are going about their business as if nothing is different. And just that quickly, we are overtaken by a feeling that we do not quite fit in the way we did before.

We feel a gulf of separation opening up between us and other people. Sometimes other folks avoid us, not sure of what they should say about our illness. Sometimes we avoid other folks, tired of having to explain how we are doing over and over again.

And we do not just begin to feel separated from our neighbor, but we can also feel separated from our God. How could God let this happen to us? How could God let us lose our job, our health, our spouse? Haven't we always gone to church? I used to feel God was blessing my life. I am not sure I feel that way anymore.

And we do not just feel separated from our neighbor and from God, but we can also feel separated from ourselves, from our own life. I used to like the story of my life. It has not always been a smooth ride, but I always felt like I was living a fortunate life. Now, I am not so sure.

Sarah Tucholsky experienced both the first and second type of wounds while playing softball for Western

Oregon University battling their rival, Central Washington University, for the league championship. Sarah came to bat last spring with two runners on base. She is only 5'2" and had never hit a home run in either high school or college, but in this last at-bat of her softball career she hit the ball over the left center field fence for what would be the game winning home run and lead to the league championship.

I say it would be the game winning home run, except that Sarah missed first base as she turned for second. She quickly pivoted to go back and touch the bag, but as she did so, she tore ligaments in her knee and collapsed in agony. As her horrified team looked on, she painfully crawled back to first and hugged the bag. Her injury was the first wound, a career ending blow-out of her knee.

But then came the second wound: the ump's ruled that no one on her team could touch her, help her or run the bases for her. As her teammates screamed for her to get up, all Sarah could do was hug the bag, knowing that, in her base running mistake and injury, she had let her team and herself down. She was physically and emotionally isolated on the field, surrounded by adversaries and separated from her team.

Stuff breaks down. There is a force in creation that breaks things down and drives things apart. That is the first thing I believe. I've seen it.

Here's the second thing I believe. There is also a force in creation that creates things, that holds them together, that reunites them, that heals them. That creative power, that power of union and reunion, is God. It is God who overcame the chaos in the first verses of Genesis. As Paul wrote of Christ in Colossians 1:17, "in him all things hold together . . .".

No matter what adversities you and I may suffer, no matter what powers of separation may be unleashed by a diagnosis, a pink slip or a "Dear John" letter, God is abroad in creation reaching out to us through Jesus to reunite, to reconcile and to resurrect. As the evangelist wrote in John 17:20-23, Jesus' final prayer was that we might be one, as Jesus and the father are one, they in us and we in them. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans at 8:39, "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." And just because Jesus knew of the powers that can

separate us from God, neighbor and even our own life, so Jesus came to proclaim the great commandment to love God and neighbor as we love ourselves. (Matthew 22:37-40)

That's the second thing I believe. I believe there is a power of God abroad in creation that holds things together, that reconciles and reunites, that overcomes the powers of separation. That power is God. That power is love.

As Sarah Tucholsky lay in the dirt writhing and clutching first base, Mallory Holtman, the opposing team's star first baseman and conference home run champ, asked the ump a question. The ump gave Mallory her answer, and Mallory leaned over and gently lifted Sarah up in her arms.

And then, as the crowd and both teams came to their feet in cheers and then tears, Mallory and her teammates linked arms and slowly carried Sarah around the bases, gently lowering her to tap each base with her foot. The home run counted. Sarah's team won. Mallory's team lost. Sarah's team went on to win the championship. The power of love overcoming the power of separation.

Who are we? We are a congregation of Christians who have inherited a glorious tradition of covenant. Our experiment on this continent began with Governor John Winthrop's 1630 sermon exhorting us to "abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities." For over 275 years we have been swearing out a promise to walk together in Christian love and sympathy.

What do we believe? We believe that we are not alone in this to and fro of the powers of separation. We believe that we are not alone because the very author of creation is present to us as a power of unconditional love and acceptance. We believe that we are not alone because that very author of creation came among us to gather us into congregations where we would express and live out that love for one another.

What should we do? In the words of the old hymn, we should "rise and act our creed." We should keep our eyes open for any brother or sister stumbling around first base and make sure we carry them around the base path with us. We should link arms and make sure we all

get through this together. We should make sure that no one is left behind, no one is separated out. No one lacks life's necessities of food, heat, light or shelter.

Henry Nouwen wrote, "It is a great mystery that compassion often becomes real for people not simply because of one hospitable individual, but because of an atmosphere resulting from a common life. Certain parishes have a true healing influence that can make both their members and their guests feel understood, accepted, cared for and loved."c

That is who we are. That is what we believe. That is what we should do. **Amen.**

a John A. Stroman, *Thunder From the Mountain* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1990), 28-29.

b Tara Parker Pope, "Girls, Sports and Sportsmanship" from "Well: Tara Parker Pope On Health", *The New York Times*, May 7, 2008.

c From Henri J.M. Nouwen, Donald McNeill, Douglas Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (Doubleday Books:1982) at page 55: