

CONSIDER YOURSELF AT HOME – OCTOBER 22, 2006

Preached by the Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg, Schellsburg, PA
The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
Stewardship 6 - Presence
Job 38 excerpts, Mark 10:35-45

Ann Weems is a noted poet and liturgical writer from St. Louis. In her poem, "Touch in Church"¹, she talks about the power of passing the peace in worship. We don't pass the peace here, but we are a hugging church – have you noticed? How many of you hugged or were hugged by at least one person between the time you walked in and the time the service started? I bet you'll get more before you leave, too.

What is all this touching in church? It used to be a person could come to church and sit in the pew and not be bothered by all this friendliness and certainly not by touching. I used to come to church and leave untouched. Now I have to be nervous about what's expected of me. I have to worry about responding to the person sitting next to me. Oh, I wish it could be the way it used to be; I could just ask the person next to me: How are you? And the person would answer: Oh, just fine, And we'd both go home ... strangers who have known each other for twenty years.

How well do we really know each other here in this place, even those we hug every week? Do we truly know the sorrows and pain, the depths of joy, the struggles and triumphs of faith that those around us encounter through the years? Ann Weems again:

Lord, I'm not big enough to touch and be touched! That stretching scares me. What if I disappoint somebody? What if I'm too pushy? What if I cling too much? What if somebody ignores me?

The sad reality is that in some places, hugs are no longer allowed because occasionally, someone abuses the privilege of hugging another person and the hug becomes a physical threat. What sorrow must that kind of person have encountered that he or she would use something so natural and comforting for hurtful purposes? Can you imagine coming here and not getting or giving your quota of hugs? Hugs are a privilege – both to give and to receive. Hugs also carry with them an obligation, however: the obligation to care. Ann Weems finishes her observations:

I'm touched by it, I'm enveloped by it! I find I do care about that person next to me! I find I am involved! And I'm scared. O Lord, be here beside me. You touch me, Lord, so

¹ Weems, Ann. *Reaching for Rainbows*. Louisville, KY, 1980: Westminster Press.

that I can touch and be touched! So that I can care and be cared for! So that I can share my life with all those others that belong to you! All this touching in church – Lord, it's changing me!

One of the ways that we are fully present to one another is through our touch. We are family – and we are a family that has learned to welcome others to the party, so to speak. In Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, Dodger makes it his mission to give Oliver a home. Perhaps not a home like you and I would think of, but a home nonetheless. Lionel Bart put it this way in *Oliver*, his musical based on Dickens' book:

Consider yourself at home.
Consider yourself one of the family.
We've taken to you so strong.
It's clear we're going to get along.
Consider yourself well in
Consider yourself part of the furniture.
There isn't a lot to spare.
Who cares? Whatever we've got we share!²

God invited Adam and Eve to consider themselves at home in the Garden of Eden. They blew that, of course, but God didn't leave them homeless. God gave them, and us, an amazing world – the very same one that he speaks of to Job when God chooses to answer Job's probing questions about human life.

God gave us a world in which the ibis are told when the Nile will flood and the lions given opportunities to hunt their prey. God's home for us is one in which HE created the weather patterns for rain and dry, sun and wind. Our worldly home is not for us to create – God took care of that quite nicely.

I could go on here with another sermon entirely on taking care of God's home for us – environmental stewardship – but we'll tackle that another Sunday.

Our physical home here on earth is a beautiful one. But it is up to us to give our communities and our families homes that are safe and nurturing like the world God has given us.

² "Consider Yourself at Home" from *Oliver*, words and music by Lionel Bart. ©1963.

And again, Jesus is trying to teach his disciples this very concept. Last week, we talked about using our gifts and talents to serve the least of these. This week, Jesus links that service to the attitude with which we uplift the least of these. And it is our attitude that either gives us a warm, nurturing home or gives us a house of strife and contention.

James and John think they know what they're asking when they demand to be seated at Jesus' right and left hands in glory. They – and probably the rest of the disciples, given their reaction to the mere making of the demand – believe that the glory Jesus promises is one achieved without suffering, without hard work, without sacrifice. As usual, they're on the wrong track. To sit at Jesus' right and left hands is an honor reserved for those who would humble themselves to be slaves – not just servants here, but slaves – to others so that the first will be last and the last will be first.

That's a hard message for us to hear, isn't it? And it's easy to dismiss it as something that isn't applicable to us in the church because we're all, at least in theory, equal here. But when you really look at what Jesus is saying, there's a message for us that we cannot ignore: *As a church, who are we here for?*

Who is at home here? Who should feel at home here but doesn't because we don't humble ourselves to reach out to him or her or them? Whose mission are we serving, our own to keep our doors open or God's to bring people into relationship with him through Jesus Christ? As Rev. Dr. Ozzie Smith, our keynote speaker at Penn West Annual Meeting this year, put it, "Does the church have a mission or does God's mission have a church?"

Harold Percy has a list of ten questions for churches to ponder as they consider whether they are a church with a mission or a church for God's mission. His original article was entitled "Good News People" and focuses on the difference between a maintenance congregation – that is, a church with a mission to maintain itself – and a mission congregation – that is, a church with a willingness to do God's work in the world.

MAINTENANCE OR MISSION?³

1. In measuring the effectiveness, the maintenance congregation asks, "How many pastoral visits are being made? The mission congregation asks, "How many disciples are being made?"

³ Percy, Harold. "Good News People." Numbered paragraphs excerpted by Brian Stoffregen at Crossmarks Christian Resources, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark10x35.htm>.

We need to work on this one – but let's celebrate the number of children coming regularly now and the leadership our youth exhibit with their participation in the life of the church. Let's take a look at the number of new families who have come to us recently and lift them up in prayer.

2. When contemplating some form of change, the maintenance congregation says, "If this proves upsetting to any of our members, we won't do it." The mission congregation says, "If this will help us reach someone on the outside, we will take the risk and do it."

Change? You called a single woman in her 30's as your pastor – if that's not a risk, I don't know what is. Change is still scary, but I don't think we're afraid of it in general.

3. When thinking about change, the majority of members in a maintenance congregation ask, "How will this affect me?" The majority of members in the mission congregation ask, "Will this increase our ability to reach those outside?"

This is a mixed bag that depends on the change, isn't it? Sometimes we get so caught up in our comfort zone that we won't even rearrange the furniture at our houses, never mind accept changes in worship or in customs here at church. Other times, the change makes such sense immediately that the thought of it being scary doesn't cross our minds.

4. When thinking of its vision for ministry, the maintenance congregation says, "We have to be faithful to our past." The mission congregation says, "We have to be faithful to our future."

We're good for this in spades – we wouldn't exist today if our forebearers hadn't been faithful to the future, and my presence here is an example of your faith in our future, too.

5. The pastor in the maintenance congregation says to the newcomer, "I'd like to introduce you to some of our members." In the mission congregation the members say, "We'd like to introduce you to our pastor."

You get gold stars for this one. Half the time new folks come in, I can't get to them to meet them because so many of you are waiting to greet them and make them feel welcome. Keep up the good work, but let me through once in a while, would you?

6. When confronted with a legitimate pastoral concern, the pastor in the maintenance congregation asks, "How can I meet this need?" The pastor in the mission congregation asks, "How can this need be met?"

Prayer Shawl ministry and visitation are two examples of how we're working on this question. Over time as we build our ministries, I'll be asking more of you to help me in our

caring ministries because I can't do it all, nor should the care be done by me alone. We're all responsible for caring and we all can have a role to play in meeting concerns.

7. The maintenance congregation seeks to avoid conflict at any cost (but rarely succeeds). The mission congregation understands that conflict is the price of progress, and is willing to pay the price. It understands that it cannot take everyone with it. This causes some grief, but it does not keep it from doing what needs to be done.

Trust me, there will be conflict over time, and some will choose to leave because of decisions that get made. But it's always been that way, hasn't it, right from the birth of the church. And I'm sure you can name people who aren't here today because they didn't get their way on one issue or another. Maybe you've even stayed away for a while because of something like that. It's human nature, but we have to be willing to let others make decisions for themselves when a collective vision for the church is not something of which they want to be a part.

8. The leadership style in the maintenance congregation is primarily managerial, where leaders try to keep everything in order and running smoothly. The leadership style in a mission congregation is primarily transformational, casting a vision of what can be, and marching off the map in order to bring the vision into reality.

We're better at the mission on this one than you might think. The ideas in the hopper right now will begin to blossom in the year ahead, so stay tuned!

9. The maintenance congregation is concerned with their congregation, its organizations and structure, its constitutions and committees. The mission congregation is concerned with the culture, with understanding how secular people think and what makes them tick. It tries to determine their needs and their points of accessibility to the Gospel.

We need to work on this, but we'll get there.

10. When thinking about growth, the maintenance congregations asks, "How many Lutherans live within a twenty-minute drive of this church?" The mission congregation asks, "How many unchurched people live within a twenty-minute drive of this church?"

Lots and lots. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have them here with us? They won't come in unless we invite them. Have you been wondering who the sign outside was for? It says "Welcome Home!" It's not just you that we're inviting home. We're inviting all people in search

of a relationship with God into this place and this family, to be present with each other as we seek to change the world one life at a time.

I'm going to combine my answer to the last two of Percy's points.

11. The maintenance congregation looks at the community and asks, "How can we get these people to support our congregation?" The mission congregation asks, "How can the Church support these people?"

12. The maintenance congregation thinks about how to save their congregation. The mission congregation thinks about how to reach the world.

Let's take a moment to examine how big our home really is. We welcome into our home AA, TOPS, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, and the Literacy Council. We support the ministries of Love, Inc. and Your Safe Haven, the New Paris Food Bank, RSVP's sock drive, and the Bedford County Children's and Youth Advocacy Council locally. We are well known and well respected in the area for our support of local ministries and programs.

Our sponsored child is in another state, as is the Back Bay Mission. We support Operation Christmas Child and the Heifer Project, both of which have a global reach; disaster relief appeals, Neighbors in Need, and portions of Our Church's Wider Mission contributions have gone to help meet national and international needs.

All things weighed together, we're more mission than maintenance. That makes this a happening place to call home.

But we won't be a mission church – a church for God's mission, that is – without your presence among us. The stewardship of presence is critical to building a community in which each person has the opportunity both to serve and to be served. And we won't be a mission church without others joining us along the way. Which means that we have a need to tell people about our church. To that end, I want to know what you tell people about our church – what Alan McLarty calls "your elevator speech". What do you say to others to convey your excitement about our church in 30 seconds or less? You'll see around the church posters with the title "Elevator Speeches". Right now they're blank, but I want them filled by the Sunday before my installation because I have plans for what you write. So fill those posters up for me – make your presence known!

Consider yourself at home. Consider yourself part of the family. Prepare to be hugged. And roll up your sleeves and join in the fun of being a church for God's mission.