Be Responsible For Yourself

Genesis 9:8-17 & Romans 14:1-12

The South Church ^^^ March 5, 2006

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In the words of the entertainer James Brown, “I feel good!” I have practically survived winter. There is nothing much left to the winter season with the exception of a few wild snow and ice storms. I have been trudging through the valley of the shadow of death and I am nearing the other side. My tulips have already broken through the still frozen Chicago clay that only slightly resembles soil and I don’t care how bad the soil is. I know with a little sand and horse manure, God will make things grow that are both beautiful and edible. I just feel good. Hallelujah, Spring is nearly here.

There are a couple of authors that I like to read when I’m feeling blue, when I’m feeling rather down in the dumps. It’s not that they are overly positive, feel good type people. No. I think it has more to do with the fact that we share so similar growing up patterns and they like to tell stories and find meaning in things that other people just walk and perhaps see nothing.

Garrison Kiellor is one of those folks who help me see the intricately woven patterns in our lives lived in community. Most
all of you know Garrison and his Prairie Home Companions. But, this morning, I want to tell you story told by another of my favorites, his name is Fred Craddock. He is one of this world’s greatest and dare I say, most humbly powerful preachers. Fred is from the south. He tells of a recent trip out into the hill country of South Carolina. And he said that he got bored with the convention and just needed some time away and so he drove out into the country to get some air. I’m going to use his words, now.

“I saw an old cemetery. I like cemeteries. Everybody should spend a little time with their own generation, so I went to see this cemetery. I wanted to see how old some of the graves were. I like to see if several of the deaths occurred in the same year and wonder if there had been an epidemic or a natural disaster.

I was reading the markers in this cemetery, and I found one section with a huge stone bearing the family name and a lot of burial plots on either side that stretched out for some distance. And where you would normally see a mound of earth built up where a body has been buried, in this family section each rectangle was covered with a full length and width concrete slab. All the graves were lined up. There were small graves for infants and children, and there were adult graves, quite few of them, but there was one grave in which the marker and the slab indicated that the grave was at a right angle. All the other graves were lined up in neat little rows, but this one grave was cross wise or,
as we used to say, "catawampus." At that angle, it actually took up three burial plots. I pondered that. What a careless thing to do. Why would they do that?

Suddenly I became aware of another man walking around in the cemetery, perhaps for the same reason I was. I said to him, "Are you from around here?"

"Yeah," he said. "You're looking at that grave, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I knew that fellow." The grave marker recorded that the man had died in 1994 in his seventies. "We were in the same church. I knew him well. Knew him all my life."

I said, "Why this burial at an angle?"

"Well, the family wanted that, and the church agreed."

"But why?" I asked.

"Because that's the kind of guy he was."

I said, "What do you mean, 'That's the kind of guy he was'?"

"He was crossways with everybody and everything. We never knew him to be pleased about anything at home or at church. 'Well, she's she doing that?' he'd say, or 'Why'd they ask him to do that?' or 'Well, he's the wrong one to be doing this,' or 'Well, I wonder who decided to do that?' He said that kind of stuff all the time, all the time, and the family decided they wouldn't try to change him just because he was dead. So they buried him crosswise."
“They wanted it to be a witness. The family said if god wants to straighten him out then God can straighten him out. But he left here just like he lived.”

End of story.

I thought of this story after this week’s Ash Wednesday service. On Wednesday night we talked about how we are all sinners in the hands of a loving God. We talked about how churches are not always the safest place to confess your sins. Standing up and confessing some things will probably guarantee you being kicked out the same door you had just walked in. Churches, we said, are not God and God is not the church. We are a gathered community of imperfect people who are trying to learn how to be more God like and most days, we have a long way to go. Other days, we do very well!

Paul, in this mornings Scripture lesson from his letter to the Romans, had several people in the churches that he founded and served that I suspect if Paul could have had his way, they would been buried catawampus. He would have laid them out crosswise, because that is the way they were, always quarreling and picking. This grave in the cemetery was for a man who was always at church, who served the church in various capacities, but who was never in agreement or pleased. He was picky,
picky, picky all the time, but he was always there at church. In fact, I know there were some in the church at Corinth that Paul probably would have buried crosswise, and maybe even though he had never been there, maybe from what he heard there were some of the same types in the church at Rome.

We don’t want to mix up terms here this morning. When we are talking about the church in Rome in Paul’s day we are not talking about the Vatican. No. This is around the year 58 CE. The followers of Jesus, Peter and John and James and all those others were sitting strong over in Jerusalem or some place relatively near by. The city of Rome was, of course, huge. It was the capital of the empire. But, early followers of Jesus were just getting there. The Church of Rome was really more like small groups of people meeting in five or six homes. They were house churches.

And each of these churches were probably quite different. Some of them probably used Latin, another Greek, another Aramaic or Hebrew to speak in. Some of them may have had fairly formalized worship that resembled synagogue practices and others might have been extremely casual, come as you are kinds of service.

They each had their differences, but what got Paul’s goat is the
way that he heard, because he had never been there, that they all picked on each other. He said, Some of you still keep the Sabbath and that is quite all right.” I am sure those who did this were from a Jewish background and in addition to the Sunday service, they observed the Sabbath as the day of rest. The Hebrew Scriptures, which were the only ones in existence in the days of these early followers of Jesus, the Scriptures said, “Six days shall you labor, and on the seventh you shall rest. They thought, “Just because we’ve become followers of Jesus dos not mean we are going to stop obeying that commandment.” So they rest on the Sabbath, and they observed Sunday too. The problem, Paul said, was not that they observed the Sabbath; it was that they picke don everybody who did not. “Some believe the Sabbath is holy,” said Paul, “and others believe every day is holy.”

In some of the house churches, they drank wine. Some of the others, however, did not think drinking wine was proper. Maybe they found that verse in Scripture that said that a nazarite, someone who is devoted entirely to God, was not to drink any strong drink whatsoever. In any case, some of the followers of Jesus in Rome said, “No wine!” While others said, “What’s wrong with some wine?” Picky, picky, picky. Paul said, “If you drink the wine, drink to the Lord. If you do not drink it, do not drink it to the Lord. But leave each other alone.”
Some of the followers of Jesus ate only vegetables; they did not believe in eating meat. Now the problem was that all meat was butchered on some one's altar table. The priests of that altar got some and the rest was put out on the market. But, the temple/altar system had a monopoly supported by the Roman government. If you bought meat, it was tainted, many of the early followers of Judiams and Jesus believed, by the altars that were dedicated to other gods.

Some of the early Jesus people said, "There really are no other God's so there is nothing with the meat," while others said, "Not m. I'm not going to eat that stuff, it's of the devil. Satan stained. And when they would all get together for a fellowship dinner, I am sure there were some who said, "You know the church down the street, the cute little one that is sort of catawampus on the lot, they are in charge of the next big fellowship potluck. They so liberal, it will be just like them to try to serve us meat. Well, I'm just going for the program. I won't eat the meat. I just eat vegetables myself."

Paul said, "If you want to eat just vegetables, just eat veggies. If you want to eat meat, eat a quarter pounder. But quit picking on each other as if this stuff means anything in the ultimate sense. Because it doesn't! Stop trying to force everyone else into your pattern of eating meat, not eating meat, drinking wine
or not drinking wine, keeping the Sabbath on Saturday, Sunday or any other day. But whatever you and certainly, however, it is that you communicate what you are doing, do it only to the honor and praise of God and certainly not in some snotty, self-righteous way to judge someone else.

What the good old Apostle Paul understood only to well, is that people of strong faith often become very judgemental and inflexible and very critical of others. Paul knew that it is a thing that people of deep faith have to struggle with...

Because when you and I allow the fulness of God to permeate our very souls and we become conscious of God moving in us, rearranging stuff in us, how we believe and what we have come to believe is essential to a full and a faithful life......we come to feel more deeply and strongly about things. We care more than we did before, and one way this caring can get expressed, not admirable of course, is by being discontent, even ill-tempered sometimes, toward people who do not measure up.

When God begins to truly go through our veins week after week after week after week, it changes us. I daresay, that if we will come and worship and serve every week......if weekly if not daily we will commit ourselves to being submerged into God’s presence.......it will in the course of time change us. If any of us do not want to be changed into the direction of being faithful
servants of God — then I suggest that you need to be very irregular in worship and irregular in attendance in any number of events and projects that this or any church considers essential. Because if you and I turn ourselves over to the fulness of God .....not just weekly, but daily......folks we will change and some of what we change into will put us onto a collision course with aspects of people and culture that we used to be fairly friendly with.

We live in a beautiful world that just last week saw the human population in it grow to 6.5 billion. With that many of us, huge parts of the planet are becoming nearly unlivable and most of the population growth is happening in areas which can least sustain so much population.

I love natural beauty but as I ponder religiously, with my faith, what it means to be a faithful caretaker, steward of the earth that is already seriously overpopulated.....it puts me on a collision course with those governments and religious institutions that actively deny there is a problem and are actually encouraging more and more growth and work to deny folks easy access to health care and reproductive freedom and sane good science that is telling us how must change or else we may all die poisoned by our own environments.

If you have worshipped God and studied the holy Scriptures and
allowed God's sense of balance and harmony to flow through our veins.....you just can't stand people intentionally and purposefully spoiling the planet that our children and their children will inherit from us. So suddenly you becoming increasingly an activist and you stand up and say in mixed company.....there is something wrong with the way we are living that is causing global warming. A few years ago you probably wouldn't have stood up and made a scene. But, when God is living through us.....God always stands up for what is wrong against the powers of greed and destruction.

Being in worship, allowing God to be active in our very persons -- gets us to caring deeply for people and the rest of God's created order. There are people who is a child is abused, some folks are just hurt to tears, while others aren't horribly move at all. If a student in school is embarrassed in front of the others, there are one or two students who simply cannot stand it to see that happen to others and they stand up for them. Why? Just picking up a little here and there of what God says is important, one begins to value every human life, to treasure people and every natural aspect of this world for what we all are.....created in God's image, and you get to where you don't want to see that which God inspired.....hurt, injured or abused. Ever. Period. No add ons.
So Paul says that instead of pick, pick, picking on stuff that really doesn't amount to a hill of beans, we should let our energy flow, let our heightened sensitivity be devoted to what really matters in the world.

There is something about being here, being anywhere where the presence of God is sought out.....and then God's essence gets to moving through your very veins and it changes us. You know that don't you?