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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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“Practicing Our Faith” Series/Shaping Communities
Exodus 19:1-6, Matthew 22:34-40

“Practicing Our Faith-Shaping Communities”

The perennial Christian strategy, someone has said, is to gather the people, break the bread, and tell the stories.

It is as simple, and as disarming, as that. But within that simplicity lie complex questions, such as:
What shape should the gathering take?
Do some sit in carefully designated spaces and the rest sit elsewhere?
And who breaks the bread? Do all, or only some?
For that matter, who tells the stories?
Do all take a turn, or do people speak as the Spirit moves them?
Are some interpretations and interpreters more authoritative than others?
And if so, on what grounds?

The Apostle Paul urged the church at Corinth to judge all bread breaking and storytelling and congregating by whether it was “done for building up” the community. But even Paul’s admonish wasn’t sufficient, because as we know, gathering the people, breaking the bread, and telling the stories is more complicated than at first it seems. Because ordering our life together is complicated, and what some people think “builds up” the community, others think will break down the community.

Now, you should know that as I wrote this sermon (over a week ago), I was also watching the General Assembly live feed of the marriage debate. And as I watched the live feed, it was clear that while some people believe approving a change in our constitution to allow teaching elders to officiate at same-sex marriages will build up the body, others think it will tear the body apart. Some people believe it will allow more people to sit at the table and break bread and have their story heard, while others believe a change will drive people away from the table.

And the marriage issue was only one of many complex issues the Assembly debated. The Middle East? That is a complex issue.

So, who gets to gather? Who gets to break the bread? And who gets to tell the stories? Taking it a step further, who gets to decide who gathers? Who gets to decide who breaks the bread? And who gets to decide whose stories are told, and by whom?

These questions are not easy to answer; and the answers are often very complex. Furthermore, we will not always agree on the answer. But sometimes the answer isn’t nearly as important as how the question, or conversation, is approached. How do we frame the conversation? How do we shape the questions? And how do we shape the debate that surrounds the questions and conversation so everyone feels like their stories have been heard?

Now, no one is better at shaping debate than Presbyterians. For us, debate is an art form. When we started to debate the use of the Oxford comma in an amendment to an amendment to a substitute

motion during the Middle East debate at General Assembly, I knew we'd hit the holy grail of Presbyterianism. I mean, who else debates the use of the Oxford comma?

But, that debate says something about us – not all of which is positive, mind you! But it does say we take the questions and debate seriously, we take your story seriously, and we take our form of government seriously.

And that says something. Because governance is important. And as Presbyterians, our form of government shapes every level of our church councils, and therefore shapes what sort of church community we will have. I realize governance is looked down upon these days and viewed negatively. But governance is a crucial part of our life together because governance helps shape our communities, whether that community is a church, a city, a country, a school, a Rotary Club or even a country club.

And, good governance is necessary for the positive flourishing of life because it helps life to survive and thrive. As an example of this, Terry and I have had to care for Henry's saltwater tank while he's been away at camp. The upkeep of the tank isn't that difficult; about once a week 10-20% of the water needs to be changed out with saltwater, and in the interval the tank is topped off with RO water. This way of ordering the tank keeps the chemistry balanced.

But Henry had not been keeping up with the water changes, so the chemistry started to get off, and the corals and shrimp all died. The salinity was off the charts. So now we are working to get the tank back in order. To do this we have to be diligent about the water changes, we cannot be haphazard.

And so it is with any community; in order for life to survive and thrive, there's got to be order – governance – and ideally that community governs itself in such a way that complex questions can be asked, and the manner in which they are asked will allow everyone to gather at the table, break the bread, and have their stories heard, even if they don't all agree.

In the Exodus reading from this morning, we heard what is, essentially, the prologue to the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments, as you know, was the first form of government we have in the Bible. These 10 commandments, or laws, gave shape to the Israelite community. Follow these laws, God seemed to say, and your community will survive and thrive, because it will be properly ordered.

But God didn't hand down the TC in a vacuum. God didn't plop them down and say, "OK, you all obey these laws now, you here?" God established a relationship with the people and then gave them the law.

As you know, it's been a long journey for the Israelites to get to Mount Sinai. They've walked the streets of Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, and hiked the wilderness to get there. They've witnessed the killing of all Egyptian firstborn sons and the annihilation of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea; they cried out to God to get them out of Egypt and to free them from slavery, and then they cried out to God to give them food and water. And every time God heard their cries, and God came to their rescue. Every time the Israelites needed help, God saved them. Every time, without fail, God responded to their requests.

So after all this time, God says to Moses, "Bring the people to me. They've seen what I've done; they know I am faithful. It is now time to give shape to this community. They will be a holy nation, and I will be their God, and together we will do great things." That's what we hear God saying in today's Exodus reading.

And it's so important to know this backstory because the law was given with love to the people so they could survive and thrive.

God gave the TC as a way of saying "Here. These will help you to gather the people, break bread, and tell the stories. If you follow these in a spirit of love, you will survive and flourish." God knew that if you have a relationship of only rules and no love, it's destructive; if you have one with only love and no rules, it's chaos. The two go hand-in-hand. This is why, with the TC, you can't remove the love from the commands, and you can't remove the commands from the love. You need both in order for the relationship to work and to make sense. You need to know that the relationship came before the law.

And because of that, the law allowed the people to gather, break the bread, and share the stories, because the law – contrary to what we may think – is not about me, it's about us, and the shape our communities will take. God gives us this form of government as a way to love our neighbor, even if we don't always agree with our neighbor.

Consider, for example, the first command, "You shall have no other gods before me," is not just good for God, it is an act of love for my neighbor. Why? Because it is good for my neighbor for me not to make money or power my god; it is good for my neighbor for me to maintain the gracious, forgiving Yahweh as my God; it is good for my neighbor that my God is the Creator of all people and all nations.

Love . . . and law . . . cannot be separated. Both are needed for people to gather, break bread, and share their stories. Both are critical for people to feel like their voices are heard and taken seriously.

You have, by now, read news accounts about the other major decision coming out of the General Assembly, and that was the decision to divest from 3 companies – Caterpillar, Hewlet-Packard, and Motorola, because their products are deemed harmful to the Palestinian people and the prospects for peace. We are still invested in other companies doing business in Israel. It was a very close vote: 310 to 303. Two years ago, the decision not to divest was approved by the same narrow margin. Clearly, on this issue, we are a deeply divided church. And even though Moderator Rada said right after the electronic vote was taken that "In no way is this a reflection of our lack of love for our Jewish brothers and sisters," the vote was – and is – being interpreted as an anti-Semitic one.

Which means we at the local level need to work even harder at reaching out to our Jewish sisters and brothers, inviting them to the table to break bread and share stories. We need to listen to what they say, even when passions run high. Conversations between supporters and opponents need to take place at the table in a manner of respect that works toward that elusive goal of peace and justice that everyone wants. And we need to always be aware that the table at which we sit is not our table, it is God's table.

And at that table, we are doing God's work. And that's hard work to do. God's lead is not always easy to interpret or to follow. We don't always make the right decision. And we don't always agree with the decisions that are made. I've been a part of church, presbytery, general assembly and session meetings where I haven't agreed with every decision that is made. In a minute we'll install Rufus and Terry to the session, and my guess is they can say the same thing. But for the most part, our form of government works, because it shapes a community that allows all voices to be heard. And at its best, it shapes a community that allows people to gather, and break bread, and share stories even when we disagree.

Amen.

Sources:

Practicing our Faith, Dorothy Bass

www.workingpreacher.org