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Cross and Crown
“God’s Story Connects With Our Story” October 4, 2009
18th Sun. after Pentecost.
Genesis 2:18-24
Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

Anniversaries are celebrations. And so this weekend we celebrate 29 years as a worshipping community – launching our 30th year of worshipping God, teaching all ages, reaching out in service, and inviting others to be part of our community of Christ-like love.

Anniversaries bring out mixed feelings. For they bring joy on the one hand and yet they remind us of days past, of events we may never experience again except in our memory: they remind us of

those who have left us through death and entered the church eternal.

Yet, as we think about our anniversary, it is perhaps best observed in stories. We remembered some of those stories in the power point slide show of our history many of us saw last night. We can also remember our history in terms of anecdotes that we share with one another over coffee and conversation today. We also can think of our identity, as a church, in terms of who we are right now and what we will offer in the future.

Our mission statement (on the west wall) is one expression of who we are. It reminds us that we are about sharing. And what do we share: God's love with one another and with others. And we share the gospel message of salvation that God

so loved the world and us that God gave his only Son to be our savior and guide for our life – that God loves us unconditionally. And we share that we are bound together in the forgiveness of sin brought by Jesus Christ.

Even our name reflects our celebration in terms of who we are: Cross and Crown. The cross recognizes the gift Jesus brought to humans even though it cost him suffering and an early death. The cross also recognizes our own suffering as we stand up for the things of Christ. The crown reminds us of hope and joy – that taste of God's kingdom of heaven coming here on earth – it's what we pray for each Sunday in the Lord's Prayer.

All of this is to say that our story as a congregation is rooted in the Biblical stories of our

faith. And the stories that give us our roots go beyond the story of the Cross of Christ and the empty tomb and the Christ we treat as our king. For as we go forward this year, I would like to help us form a concrete vision of “who we are” in terms of our mission and our purpose. I’d like us to find Biblical stories that can help shape the story of our congregation this coming year and even in the years thereafter.

Let’s ask the basic question: Who are we, Cross and Crown? How is God working through us? What do we see God is doing here at Cross and Crown. Where is God leading us?

To begin this reflection I’d like to share three Biblical stories that I think are already part of our Cross and Crown story. Yet there is more to each

of these stories that may help us move forward to be even more of who we are meant to be.

The first Biblical story I lift up describes “Us” – describes “Us Cross and Crownians.” And in describing us, it is also a call for us to be even more of who we are! This is the story found in the last paragraph of our gospel lesson today: “People were bringing little children to (Jesus) in order that he might touch them; but the disciples spoke sternly to them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” (Mark 10:13-14)

Children had no status or power in the first century world of Mark. Yet, just like today, many parents treasured their children and wanted Jesus

to touch them. God's concern and God's kingdom extends even to these little ones, says Jesus. To receive the kingdom of God like a little child is to recognize one's dependence on the grace of God, who sets the conditions for entering the kingdom. And those conditions do not exclude children or others that some people exclude.

Jesus welcomes the ones who find no welcome in the world. Jesus even blesses them with the invitation to not only be part of his family, but to come and be part of what God is doing in this world!

We know that the social mores in the time of Jesus did not allow children to disturb the teacher Jesus and his students. Yet Jesus' ministry was all about including those not ordinarily included. Far

beyond being a lesson in childlike faith that qualities like innocence or acceptance are to be admired, Jesus is more speaking of the radically inclusive nature of the realm of God, where those considered non-persons or of no importance are first in line.

Now, if this story is to be our story, we too must ask: Who are the non-persons in our midst? That is, what group or groups of people are not seen by many others because they ignore them.

I would submit that there are many people who are treated as non-persons in our society today. Fortunately we as a congregation have befriended some people others have abused or rejected. We have reached out to people grieving and to those who have been injured and lost jobs. We serve food to the homeless, walk to benefit the

homeless, give money to help others help the homeless, and even build homes for those who barely have a place to live.

This is a significant part of our identity: we are a people of hospitality. No matter who walks through the doors of our church, their color, their clothes, their orientation, their politics, their social status does not stop us from welcoming them.

Yet, this Bible story of Jesus' welcoming arms also challenges us to look at those we treat sternly or those we would prefer not to touch. God is sending us on a mission not only in our wider community, but here in our building to help youth and children and adult of all ages be welcomed. We are called to an intentional hospitality when someone else is not being hospitable.

Someone once talked about his church as a place he could go to after a hard week and jump into a pool of love. Isn't that a marvelous image: Cross and Crown – a pool of love? We have been that pool of love, especially in time of death and other crises. Jesus wants to remind us we can be a pool of love every time we gather together.

So, we have been – and yet we are becoming – people of hospitality. God works through us to welcome others in his pools of love and grace.

The second Biblical narrative I've selected is for our identity as servant. Many times in our lives God has used most of us as servants of God. And often we join as a group to support a project such as when we give gifts to the Hunger Appeal or our

contribution to the ELCA mission project in Jerusalem.

There are many Biblical stories about service, but I'd like to suggest Mark 10:35 and following: It's the story of two of Jesus' disciples, blood brothers James and John. They were talking and decided to ask Jesus, "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." They wanted to be the right and left hand men for Jesus when Jesus became famous. Jesus explained that he didn't give out that status. Well the other ten disciples heard James and John asking for what they considered special privilege, and they were angry. So, Jesus explained a few things: first of all his Kingdom wasn't about status. Greatness comes with being a servant, he says.

Now, I think of us: Often our prayers are asking Jesus, “We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you, God. But Jesus needs to remind us again and again “who we are.” We are certainly among his loved family, so he wants the best for us even before we pray. But greatness isn’t about getting our own way, nor is it about being the best in something. Greatness is about being a servant.

Here at Cross and Crown, we have often been servants. God has worked through us as we serve those in need, as we teach our children and youth, as we support and comfort one another, as we learn together in prayer and study. God has worked through us as we have reached out to others to help those in need.

Now God calls us to be in the right spirit about our service – we do service not to gain status in God’s eyes or the eyes of other people, but to be who we are: God’s hands and feet, eyes and ears – people whose lives are filled with meaningful activities of serving others.

So, we have been hospitable and we have been servants. And God works through us. Our third Biblical story that I lift up reminds us that we worship in a way that leads us to be missionaries for God in our daily life! We do not have to go to Africa to be missionaries even though that is a place major mission is being done!

The story is from the Gospel of John, Chapter 14 and 15. Jesus has celebrated the Passover dinner with his disciples. It is His last supper. The

supper ends with Jesus saying “Peace I leave with you.” And then he gets up from that worship celebration and says: “Rise, let us be on our way.” Jesus’ worship always led to mission. And where does he lead his disciples that fateful night. He takes them into a vineyard. As they walk through the grape vines, he says: God the Father is the vine grower; He, Jesus, is the vine; we followers are the branches; and branches are pruned to bear fruit. Our worship at Cross and Crown has inspiring music, we hear God’s love for us in its words; we are touched by Christ as he enters us through the bread and wine. We sense God is here in our midst. Then we have to put ourselves up for the sacrifice – we offer ourselves at the altar – both in terms of offering our money and in terms of offering

ourselves. And when that happens, the words at the end of our worship really mean something. “Go in Peace, Serve the Lord.” If we have been reminded who we are, that our lives are all about service to God in whatever we do – we can respond in full enthusiasm and integrity: Thanks be to God – because that’s who we are – people on a mission with our life.

In the coming weeks we might think about other Biblical stories that celebrate who we are and who we are going to be in the next 29 years. We have been Jesus’ welcoming arms. God has used us for service. Jesus says “Peace to us” and we are grateful and generous in our worship and praise.

Welcoming arms, servants, thankful and joyous people – is that us, Cross and Crownians? I believe so. And if that's who we are, say: "AMEN -- So be it."

By God's grace, we can be even more who we are!

LET US PRAY: Lord, thank you for letting us be you people. Thank you for letting us be Jesus' welcoming arms, fruitful servants, and thankful people. Lead us on. Amen.