

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
November 4, 2007
All Saint's Sunday
Our Presence

Not too long ago we set a goal of increasing our worship attendance to 150 by the end of December -- remember the Sunday when all the balloon people were here and we were challenged to take home a balloon friend and come back the next Sunday with a human one? Well, how are we doing on that? Are we growing yet?

I keep wanting that one Sunday to come when all the Redeemer people who are active members and friends show up at the same time -- the every week attenders, the once a month atttenders, the when I don't have to work on Sundays attenders, the send in the money but don't come to church people, the when something's special going on I'll be there attenders -- wouldn't that be a great day --when everyone who comes all the time and everyone who comes most of the time and everyone who comes some of the time and everyone who comes once in a while and everyone who comes hardly ever --all showed up at the same time? Wouldn't that be great?

You know, I can make my own children come to church -- but that's about it. Attending worship isn't anything that a church can force its members to do. Our presence can't be coerced or legislated. It is entirely voluntary. It is something people have to choose to want to do. As are all our promises we make here in

church. To uphold the church with our prayers, presence, gifts and service -- is a promise that either gets lived out or it doesn't. And if it does, it's because it comes from the heart. It's a promise we want to keep -- it's a promise that we choose to keep.

Okay, why does it matter? Why care whether or not people attend worship here at Church of the Redeemer? Why even talk about all this?

I guess because I really believe that to uphold the church with our presence is about as important as it gets. To be here together is, really, what it's all about. It's what makes this place a church, you know. Without us – the recognizable architecture, the sanctuary furnishing, the sign in the yard – would still indicate what function this building has – but without us, it's only a building. It's people that fulfill a church's building function. It's our presence that gives life, so to speak, to the rest of our stewardship promises – our prayers, and our gifts, and our service. Without our presence, who would pray? Who would give? Who would serve?

Being here matters. Coming together matters. Getting to know and trust and love each other matters. Being in fellowship with each other matters. Our presence in worship, in study, in outreach, in fellowship, in service, in mission, in communion, matters. Our presence matters.

In addition to the Scripture lessons for today, which all emphasize the communal and collective nature of our relationship with God, I want to lift up three other readings for our reflection. Each has to do with the importance of our presence in church -- and each gives us something, I think, to think about.

The first is from Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor's memoir of faith called Leaving Church. In the section of her memoir titled "Finding" she writes about her life and faith as the pastor of Grace-Calvary Episcopal Church in rural Georgia. Here's how she describes that church:

"While the church directory listed almost five hundred names, the 250 who actually showed up to have their pictures taken provided a more accurate count. They included college professors, real estate agents, shop owners, and artists plus a whole flock of retirees from Florida. In a big city they might have found homes in five markedly different parishes, but in a county with only one Episcopal church they learned to live together – the Yellow Dog Democrats, the National Rifle Association boosters, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the League of Women Voters. Once, when I asked a newcomer what had brought him to Grace-Calvary, he shook his head. "I know people who come to this church," he said, "and I finally had to come see for myself how they got through a Sunday morning without assaulting each other." She continues, "Far from assaulting each other, they seemed as intrigued as I was by their differences. People who canceled out one another's votes in every county election cooked soup together at the

Clarkesville Soup Kitchen. Champions of the decommissioned 1928 Book of Common Prayer attended Sunday school with charismatics who prayed with both hands in the air. When the British-born lector stood to announce a reading from the prophet I-zigh-ah, Southerners who used verb constructions such as “I might could have done that” sighed with pleasure, and when the auto mechanic in charge of the church softball team needed more players, he recruited the economist with the Ph.D. When my friends in Atlanta asked me how things were going in north Georgia, I told them I was living in a Flannery O’Connor story. I would spend one afternoon visiting a septuagenarian who lived in an octagonal house that her late husband had built for her, eating kiwis that she grew on her clothesline and listening to her reminiscences of Isadora Duncan. The next day I would take communion to a man who was back in the hospital for the third operation on his knee, which was crushed when his pickup truck rolled backward and pinned him against his trailer. After church on Trinity Sunday, I came out to my car to find a miniature Three Musketeers candy bar on the hood. Underneath it was a note from the deeply eccentric woman who lived across the street from the church. “One for all and all for one” the note read. “Happy Trinity Sunday.” (Barbara Brown Taylor, Leaving Church, HarperCollins, San Francisco, 2006, pp. 66-67).

One of the best reasons to attend Church of the Redeemer, I think, is just to be with such a marvelous and interesting mix of people. Really -- not since my seminary days in Nashville when I attended a church that Redeemer reminds me so much of, have I had the occasion to be part of such a

collection of people -- the racial mix, the socio-economic mix, the culture mix, the sexuality mix, the age mix, the profession mix, and so on. When my colleagues ask me how it's going for me at Redeemer, I affirm the overall impression that's out there in the conference that this is a challenging appointment -- but I also tell them that I've never been part of a church that's such a fun place to be on Sunday mornings for worship. I mean that. And if I wasn't the pastor and appointed to be here on Sunday mornings, and I lived in this area, and I had heard about who comes to church here, I'd want to come see it for myself, too. What we have here is a real treasure, you know. And treasures are meant to be treasured -- which when it comes to being a church means actually coming together to be the church -- to not just appreciate from a distance how Redeemer blesses us, but being here to experience that blessing. Every week I leave here glad in some way for being here -- and looking forward to coming back. Our presence in this place together blesses my life and my life.

The next reflection comes from Anne Lamott's book, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith. I quoted her words in my newsletter message a while back -- but I want to share them with you again. They're from the chapter titled "Holding On," in which she does some sharing about her relationship with her son, Sam. Here's what she says:

"We all got up at ten for church. Since Sam has to go to church with me every two weeks, his friends often tag along. They don't hate church,

because no one is making them go. They are actually all believers, too, cool guys who sometimes pray. One of them prayed with us when we were caught in a snowstorm on a ski trip. I know Sam believes that Jesus is true; sometimes he tells me about having prayed when he felt afraid, or he'll say jovially, 'God is really showing off for us today' He makes fun of me for being a bit of a Jesus freak, but he loves a gold cross I gave him – referred to as his 'bling', or even his 'bling-bling' – and we often pray together at bedtime, especially if someone we love is having a hard time. Sam has a life that encompasses his own spirituality. But he hates church. Then why do I make him go? Because I want him to. We live in bewildering, drastic times, and a little spiritual guidance never killed anyone. I think it's a fair compromise that every other week he has to come to the place that has been the tap for me: I want him to see the people who loved me when I felt most unlovable, who have loved him since I first told them that I was pregnant, even though he might not want to be with them. I want him to see their faces.....While he lives at my house, he has to do things my way. And there are worse things for kids than to have to spend time with people who love God. Teenagers who do not go to church are adored by God, but they don't get to meet some of the people who love God back. Learning to love back is the hardest part of being alive....While I can feel Sam's agonized resistance to attending church, I know there is nourishment for him there – there is real teaching – and a prime parental role is to insist that your kid get real teaching. Showing up is the lesson. The singing is the lesson, and the power of community. I can't get this to him in a nice package, like a toaster pastry or take-out. So every

two weeks, I make him come to church with me.” (Anne Lamott, Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith, Riverhead Books, New York, 2005, pp. 194-196)

Loving God back. Showing up is the lesson -- good insight, I think -- for why we're here, and for what we're doing here. Look around a bit -- you are surrounded by people who love God back. Is there anyone here you wouldn't want your kids to know or learn from? Is there anyone here your own life wouldn't be enriched by? The collective faith experience here is pretty amazing, you know. From the people who have been born and bred a Christian, to the people who have come to faith via harder means. From those who have been healed to those who have been forgiven to those who have learned to live with their addictions to those who have turned away and then come back. Lots of life and faith lessons here. But how else we will know them if we aren't present with each other? How we will know what it means to keep showing up even with our tears, or our bent backs or our failures, or our hardships -- if we don't show up now? Remember that cloud of witnesses we heard about in our reading from the letter to the Hebrews? Well -- that cloud includes us, you know. The people who have gone before us as well as the people who are with us right now -- the people who are examples to us, who encourage us, who cheer us on. I need those people -- don't you? I need you. Being present with you helps keep me running my own race of faith -- being present with me helps me be who I am and who I am called to be and who God wants me to be.

And now the last bit of reflection -- and it's not something I can read, but something I can only describe. It's how the movie Places in the Heart ends --- did you see it? It came out in 1984, and it starred Sally Field and Danny Glover and John Malkovich, and others. It was set in the 1930's, during the depression, in the south. Sally Field played a widow, Edna, whose husband, the sheriff, was accidentally shot by a young black boy, a teenager. In retaliation, the Ku Klux Klan killed the boy. Edna struggles to keep the family farm -- and to do the right thing in the midst of so much adversity and hatred. The long and short of it is that Danny Glover's character, Moze, and Malkovich's character the blind Mr. Will, end up becoming family to Edna -- and end up helping her get the cotton crop in and thereby save her farm -- but a lot of heartache and unrest happens along the way -- some other people die, and some, like Moze, who is almost killed by the Klan, are forced to leave. What happens at the end, though, is amazing. The town people are in church -- and they're taking communion and they're singing a hymn, and little by little as you're watching this, you see that sitting with the living characters are the people who died during the movie, as well as the people who left -- and sitting next to each other are the people who had hated each other during the movie -- and who had hurt each other -- and they're all in that church taking communion.

And ultimately, I guess, that's what I think it's all about. We are in this church thing together -- and the people who have gone before us -- and the people who have left us -- and the people we've hurt and the people who have hurt

us -- the people we like a whole lot and the people we don't like that much -- we're all in this church thing together. And that's where our greatest hope and our greatest strength lie. Because that's how God wants it for us -- and how God intends it to be, and whenever we come together -- in these pews, at this rail, around the tables downstairs for soup, in our classrooms with our Bibles and our books -- we have a foretaste, a preview, of what is to come -- when as, John so poignantly envisioned in his Revelation, "A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages," (stands) before the throne and before the Lamb, and they cry out together, "Salvation belongs to our God," and when they worship God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever," and when, "they will hunger and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

In our presence with each other is God's presence -- and in God's presence there is life and love -- life abundant and life eternal -- love now and love forever. Amen.