

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer

September 16, 2007

“Catch-Up Sunday”

Luke 15: 1-10; Philippians 1: 3-11

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.” (Phil 1: 3-4).

So begins Paul in his letter to the Philippians – and so I begin this sermon on this special “Catch-Up Sunday” – by thanking God for you.

I thank God for all the ways you live out your vows to uphold this church with your prayers, your presence, your gifts, and your service.

I thank God for you:

*For those of you who sing in the choir

*For all of you who teach our children and youth in Sunday School

*For everyone on Staff-Parish Relations who worked hard this summer as we worked through an important staff change in our music ministry

*For those of you who lead and attend adult Sunday School and Bible study classes

*For Active Redeemer Men and all who helped them yesterday at the fabulous Rib and Chicken Feast we enjoyed

*For everyone who is helping with our picnic after church today

*For Kari, David, and MaryAnn who attended 3 long and intense Ministry Summit sessions with me this past week

*For Beverly and those who helped her with our colorful and inviting bulletin boards

*For all the paid staff who serve us so faithfully: Kate, Eddie, Vicki and Elizabeth, Dianne, and now Anne

*For all who usher and acolyte and serve as liturgists

*For everyone who helps prepare and serve our monthly community dinner

*For Ty and everyone else who plays in our hand bell choir

*For Squire and Kari and others who help prepare the altar and the sanctuary each week for worship

*For Carolyn and all others who help with the Interfaith Hospitality Network

*For all of you who went on the summer mission trip and all of you who donated items for flood buckets

*For Patrick who edits, and Kate who duplicates, and the Wednesday Bible Study women who label and fold our monthly newsletter

*For Ann who brings us bagels and bread to enjoy before and after church

*For everyone who gives Edger, Ginny, Wilma, Caitlin and any others a ride to and from church on Sundays

*For Thea and Mauri, their daughters, and now Linnea too, for gracing our worship with their dancing

*For all the cake and meatloaf bakers, and for the reliable crew of Tony, Phil, Eric, MaryAnn, David, and others when they can for preparing and serving the 5th Wednesday InterAct meals

*For Clara who makes sure the pews are organized and filled with envelopes and pencils every week

*For all of you who count and deposit the weekly offering

*For Bob and Mary Ann who keep track of the offerings

*For everyone who chairs and all who serve on our church committees

*For Heather, Alma, Lyndon, Bridgett, Joyce, Kenny, Derek, Corbin and Cynthia who willingly share their instrumental musical gifts with us

*For David and Kari and Arnette and Alice and Mauri and David and Bev and Phil – and all others too, who regularly visit and take care of Emory and Mary

*For all of you who telephone and visit and take food to our sick and shut-in members and friends

*For Corbin who keeps our web-site up to date

*For all of you who witness to peace and social justice in your daily lives

*To all of you who come to worship on Sunday mornings – and to everyone who puts money in an offering envelope

I thank God for you – from the bottom of my heart I thank God for you. You are a gifted and giving congregation. You are a serving people. You are fun and faithful; you are committed and compassionate; you are warm and welcoming; you are interesting and inspiring. And I thank God for you. I thank God for you.

“And this is my prayer,” Paul continues in his letter to the Philippians, “that your love may overflow more and more...”(Phil 1:9).

Paul thanks God for the Philippians' love, and then prays that love will grow and overflow.

Again, so it is with me on this Catch-Up Sunday. I am not asking you to do something brand new. I am not asking for some new gift to emerge, or some new faithfulness to be demonstrated, or for some new ways of being a community to be created. This Catch-Up Sunday is not about us re-inventing who we are either as individual members or as a congregation. We aren't people who need to join the church all over again.

The Philippians didn't need to be told what to do. Paul does not offer words of admonishment. This is not a congregation in serious crisis or conflict. This is not a congregation coming apart at the seams. The Philippians pretty much have it together. They just need some encouragement and some gentle, yet focused reminders to keep doing what they're doing. To not give up in the face of discouragement or persecution of reports or conflict elsewhere. To not let some minor disagreements among them get out of hand. To keep themselves always and ever centered on the gospel of Christ, and to live out that gospel among themselves.

Today is meant as a gentle, yet focused reminder to us here at Church of the Redeemer to keep doing what we promised to do – and if we have been at all forgetful or lax to “catch-up” and get back on track. Prayers, presence, gifts and service are not one-time vows we carry out, are they? To uphold the church with these signs of commitment is not a one-shot deal. Upholding is a process verb, not a single action verb. Upholding requires some stick-to-it -iveness, some hanging in their over time-ness, some not giving upness on our part. And with anything that last a long time, there is a natural ebb and flow to our level of participation and energy. Sometimes we’re on fire for the Lord and the church -- sometimes we’re cold -- sometimes we’re lukewarm. That’s not an indictment -- that’s just the way it is. Every long-term commitment we make needs some nudging and encouragement from time to time. Isn’t that right?

If you’re married or in a committed partnership or relationship with someone, raise your hand if every day of your relationship is absolutely wonderful. Raise your hand if the honeymoon period has never ended. Okay, now shout amen if you and your significant other have had to have some serious talks about your relationship every so often. Say hallelujah if your relationship has needed some strengthening and some rebuilding along the way.

Our vows of church membership are not static. To promise to uphold the church with our prayers, presence, gifts and service is a dynamic commitment – it has its highs and lows, its times of strength and its times of weakness. Sometimes we uphold the church with great fervor – and other times the flame of our commitment flickers.

And so if you need it, today is an opportunity to rekindle that flickering flame. To catch-up on your financial pledge, for example, so that as a church we can not only pay the necessary bills like utilities, mortgage, lawn care, property taxes, and salaries, fulfill our mission and ministry responsibilities as a United Methodist congregation through our connectional apportionments, but also do the local ministry we are called to do through education and worship and fellowship and nurture and witness and mission. Falling behind in our giving happens. For all kinds of reasons. Being invited to catch-up is simply a gentle nudge of encouragement.

And something to celebrate, too! This is where Jesus' stories of the shepherd and the woman come in. Each lost something important to them, right? A sheep and a coin. They had other sheep and other coins they

didn't lose – but they were focused on the one that was lost. They searched and searched – and didn't stop until each was found – the lost sheep, the lost coin. As a New Testament professor puts it in her Christian Century essay, "These are stories to which most of us can relate all of us have experienced a crisis that abruptly turns our attention from the macrocosm to the microcosm. When such a crisis occurs, a normal human reaction is to shift focus, marshal all resources and apply every effort to solving the problem." What's abnormal, she says, is what they do after the lost sheep, the lost coin, are found. As she continues, "Normal actions involve relief, repentance, and remediation. We castigate ourselves for our stupidity. We vow relentlessly that we will never allow that to happen again. We may share our joy with our immediate family, but rarely would we throw a party for the neighbors – partly, no doubt, because we hate to admit the reason for the crisis in the first place." (Mary Schertz, The Christian Century, September 4, 2007, p. 18).

Falling behind in our pledged giving. Not being able to meet all of our conference obligations. A downward trend in worship attendance. Declining membership. Losing track of people who were once active and involved. Each of these can be a crisis that turn our attention from the macrocosm to the microcosm – from looking at our ministry and life

together as a whole to looking at it in each of its distinct parts. And each of these can be what obsesses us for a while – as a problem to be solved, an issue to be resolved. And in part that's what is driving this Catch-Up Sunday. It's a direct response to a specific need. Something got lost, so to speak, and we have to find it.

The focus, however, is on the finding and then the rejoicing -- not on the losing. The shepherd could have berated himself for letting one sheep get away. The woman could have accused herself of irresponsibility or thoughtlessness for losing that one coin. But according to Jesus, what they did was celebrate. What they did was let everyone know how grateful and happy they were to find what they had lost.

In similar fashion, our aim today is to catch-up and then to move forward in gratitude, in joy, in confidence. Dwelling on how or why we fell behind won't get us anywhere. Berating or judging ourselves for what we haven't done, or for what we've done less of than we promised, won't get us anywhere, either. Looking ahead and moving forward will.

There's a Rascal Flatts song that has meant a lot to me personally in the last 5 years or so. A couple of the verses go like this:

“I’ve dealt with my ghosts and I’ve faced all my demons, finally content with the past I regret. I’ve been burdened with blame, and trapped in the past for too long -- I’m moving on.

At last I can see life has been patiently waiting for me. I know there’s no guarantee, but I’m not alone. There comes a time in everyone’s life when all you can see are the years passing by and I have made up my mind that those days are gone. I’m moving on.

Perhaps those are good words for us a church, too -- that we’re moving on. Not stuck in what has been, not blaming ourselves or each other, not trapped in the past -- but accepting that God is patiently waiting for us – and that in hope, in confidence, in joy, we can move on.

Remember Paul’s encouraging words to the Philippians:

In chapter 1: “I am confident of this, for the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”

In chapter 3: "...I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

In chapter 4: "Finally, beloved keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

And finally his concluding verse: "To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen."

Paul ends as he begins. With thanksgiving. And so do I. Thanks be to God – for you – for this church – for what we are called to be and do together – thanks be to God. For the prayers we pray, for the presence of each other in worship, in study, in fellowship, for the gifts of money and talent we give, and for all the ways we serve God through our acts of service in this church and in our community. Thanks be to God -- and to God be glory forever and ever. Amen.

