

Romans 11: 17-18

John 15: 1-5

October 8, 2017

Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

I've always taken comfort and reassurance from the story of the churchgoer who complained that he had been listening to sermons for years and couldn't remember a single one. He wondered why he kept going to church instead of staying home with a cup of coffee and reading the Sunday paper. Now, no doubt he would be reading the news from his Kindle pulled out of "the cloud."

His friend and fellow congregant gave this reply: "Well, my wife has made me over a thousand meals over the course of our marriage. To tell the truth, I cannot remember a single one. Yet over the course of our marriage I have been nourished and strengthened for my work and our life together. "

As most ministers and music directors will tell you, preaching and leading worship is a lot like preparing dinners week after week. It is sustenance for ordinary time. It is an hour and fifteen minutes a week. We come; we go and carry on with our lives. Some of us sing,

some visit the sick or write notes, some work on the building, serve meals to homeless people, work in the food cupboard, deliver meals on wheels and serve on session and Deacons. Some lead bible studies, organize fellowship events and seek to provide education for children. Others edit a monthly newsletter and maintain a web site, keep track of the finances, support the staff and participate in Presbyterian Women. Still others are ushers and greeters, liturgists, lead and attend bible studies which support women living with cancer. Numerous others are involved with groups and agencies which have no direct connection with the church but which support the health of the community. All of these are the ordinary daily activities of Christians.

So too are the everyday tasks of being life partners, parents of children and children of parents—especially adult children of aging parents who can no longer care for us but who need our care.

We do not expect great miracles to happen because of what we do. Sometimes we wonder if what we do makes any difference but

on the whole most of us do what we do *because it means something to us to do something for others*. We do what we do because we have a sense that our lives matter—not only in the ordinary daily walk of being Christian human beings—but, in a way we cannot explain, our lives matter in the big scheme of things. *Our lives matter to God*.

So, whether weekly or monthly, we gather for nourishment we cannot get from anywhere else. Sometimes we leave feeling uplifted. Sometimes we don't. Sometimes we leave happier because of a conversation in fellowship time. Sometimes a careless comment leaves us hurt and angry.

That these things happen is shocking only to people who don't walk with Jesus. They observe us and shake their heads. These people are supposed to be models of the community. They are supposed to be more moral and ethical and caring than us. But look, they are no more moral than we are! They are captive to the idea that the church is an enclave of the self-righteous whose chief

pleasure is to look down on others and to get them to conform to their code of belief and behavior.

If they *did* seek to come to know Jesus and to join us in walking with him they would discover that we walk with Jesus for one simple reason—*to walk with Jesus!* Why, because we are the sinners who seek Jesus for mercy and forgiveness. We are the ones who know better than anyone else just how far short we fall when it comes to leading the so-called Christian life. We are wide open to criticism. We take Jesus seriously when he tells the Pharisees—the good, moral people—“I did not come to the well, but to the sick.” We are the community of the imperfect. We are here because with God’s help, we have managed to get up one more time than we have fallen. We are able to get up because Jesus has us tenderly and firmly by the hand. We look to him and he gets us back on our feet.

The righteous referred to by the prophet Jeremiah are right with God not because they are good boys and girls. It is because their roots reach deep in the streams of living water. They are

sustained by the nourishment of God. They are blessed, that is that they experience deep joy because they have a deep connection with the life of God which does not fail in times of drought and desolation. We have an inner resource that somehow allows us to move through great trials, be they in our immediate lives or in the tragedies of people far away.

We come together because we know that somehow we are strengthened by being together, even when that sometimes means we frustrate and irritate one another. The great spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen defined community as the place where there is someone who I can't stand. It is not the community of the home of happy people from happy valley. Nouwen states that the one who irritates us the most is in fact *Jesus* teaching us to see things from God's point of view. So the true Christian community is neither homogeneous nor orderly. At our best we are a community of characters with loads of wonderful qualities and an equal amount of flaws which some might dare to call *sins*.

It is in a community like this—a cast of characters who sometimes don't behave quite right where the trains don't run on time and passengers are not all like us—where Jesus is present, *truly present*.

And because we are who we are we know that at the deepest level cut off from the vine of Jesus we lose the connection that sustains our lives. The connection we find in the weekly ordinary nourishment that is called Sunday worship and the activities whereby we care for others beyond our own needs. We do this because when we do, we know we are walking with Jesus and doing the things he cares about when he was here.

And for all we do, the money we give, the ministry we have, the caring we offer, we know that we are sustaining the living presence of Jesus in the world. The truly amazing revelation is that we are not sustaining the living presence of Jesus. God through Jesus is the root that sustains us. Amen.