

John 13:31-35
Galatians 5:13-6:2
I Peter 1:22-2:3

A LOVING COMMUNITY

Years ago, I was in a very pleasant verbal sparring match with Rabbi Sy Dresner. It went on for several years and he usually won, but not every day.

Abe was an accountant. He worked too hard, but he was a devoted family man and a very loyal member of the local synagogue. His number-one priority in life was to get his son through college. The boy was at Brandeis University and doing very well, but one day Abe received a letter. It was carefully written and carefully worded, and it told that his son had become friends with some Christians on campus. The friendships had grown, he had started to go to their meetings, and now he had decided to become a Christian. In fact, he was to be baptized the following week.

Abe was beside himself. He couldn't eat or sleep. Finally he went looking for his friend, Isaac. "O Isaac," he said, "what am I to do? My son – my precious boy for whom I have prayed and planned and labored all these years – is going to leave the faith of his fathers and become a Christian. Oy veh! What am I to do?"

"Funny you should mention that," said Isaac. "Only two days ago, I got a telephone call from my boy. Very same thing. Here he is, three years at Brown University. Suddenly I learn that, for the past two years, he has been getting more and more involved with a group of Christian friends. I am devastated. Now he tells me he is joining their church this Sunday. What have I done wrong? What can I do now?"

In grief and confusion, Isaac and Abe went to see Jacob, one of the teachers at their synagogue. "O Jacob, what are we going to do?" they said. "Our sons – the precious ones upon whom all our hopes rest – *both of them* are about to leave the faith of their fathers and become Christians. Surely there is something we can do. Tell us what we can do."

"Funny you should mention that," said Jacob. "Just this morning I got a fax from my son. Very same thing. I send him through Hebrew school, teach him as well as I know how. Now, off in college, he starts getting friendly with Christians. Next thing you know, I get this fax

telling me he is leaving the faith of his fathers and converting to Christianity. This is terrible – terrible.”

So all three went to call on Rabbi Joseph. “Rabbi,” they said, “if ever we needed your wisdom and learning, it is now. Our sons, all three of them, have decided to leave the faith of their fathers and become Christians. We are bereft. We don’t know where to turn or what to do. Please, please advise us.”

“*Funny you should mention that,*” said Rabbi Joseph. “I received an email from my son at Stanford just a few hours ago. Very same thing. Here I am, a rabbi. All my life I have devoted to our God and to the ways of our people. Now my son, my only son – who grew up in my home and ate at my table – has decided to leave the faith of his fathers and become a Christian.”

Finally the four of them, in tears and consternation, turned to the only source of comfort left. They went into the synagogue together to pray: “O Lord our God – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – we come to you with heavy hearts and much anguish. You alone can help us. We come to tell you that our sons, our precious sons, are leaving the faith of their fathers to become Christians.”

There was deep silence in the synagogue. And then a quiet voice, but with depth and resonance beyond telling, said: “*FUNNY YOU SHOULD MENTION THAT.*”

We have said that the church is not made up of the people we choose. Rather, it is made up of the people who are responding to Jesus – to the call of the Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ. The bond between us is more than some mutual-admiration society – far more than our agreements or disagreements with each other on any particular subject. Because Jesus has called to us in some way – and because we have tried to respond – it’s like “any friend of His is a friend of mine.” That does not mean we automatically love each other. But it does put us on the Road to Antioch, where learning to love each other, and acting in love toward one another, is inevitably and inescapably our aim. More and more clearly all the time, we realize how much it is Jesus’ aim.

There are, of course, endless things to be done for and about Christian community, especially when we perceive it to be part of the “body of Christ” in our world. We will not get it all done here. We do not want to get in charge of each other’s lives here. So we must keep

studying the frameworks, seeing the vision, letting the Holy Spirit give us our assignments. That will be plenty to keep us busy and happy for as long as we are here.

The Road to Damascus is about the love of God. It ends with our loving God, but it starts with God loving us.

The Road to Jericho is about loving our neighbor. It also depends on God loving us first. You cannot give it away until you have received it.

The Road to Antioch is about a loving community. And that depends upon the individuals within the community personally knowing the love of God. Even after that, a loving community is more than a conglomerate of individuals loving their neighbors. The Road to Antioch is more than just a lot of Jericho Roads piled on top of each other or end-to-end. The Road to Antioch has some surprises and limitations and even some disappointments. You ready? Here we go.

Everybody hold hands. We are talking about the Road to Antioch – the building of a loving community. Clearly you cannot walk such a road alone. Everybody hold hands. If you are sitting with somebody too unfriendly to hold your hand, move. Kind of embarrassing, isn't it? How do these people feel about having to hold your hand? I know some of you hate it when the minister tries to get into this sticky, touchy-feely stuff. But you know me better than that by now. Come on, hold hands. Some things are hard to communicate. I need you to help me.

I can hear your thoughts: Sermons last about twenty minutes. It's going to be a nervous, sweaty situation if he tries to get us to hold hands through the whole sermon. Already we know he's trying to get us to see that we have to hold hands all the time, in deeper ways, if we are to be Christ's church. There are no Lone Rangers in Christendom. But we can get the point without holding somebody's hand.

Please, hold somebody's hand for a while. Imagine now, with all of us holding hands, trying to go somewhere together. How can we decide where to go or which way to move first? What "head" gives instruction to the body? Do we not all move at a different speed, with different stamina? Helping each other and being together sound wonderful in theory. But what a limitation! What a severe curtailment to our individual freedom. Maybe we could each decide to "be together" when we felt like it, and go our own way the rest of the time. But then, when would anybody be around when we *needed* or *wanted* to be together?

That is what modern American community has been turning into, is it not? At least the modern American church. “I’m with you ... if it isn’t inconvenient ... if something better doesn’t come along.” “I’m a bridge over troubled water ... if the creek has run dry ... and I happen to feel like it.” How much loyalty is there in that hand you are holding? Would it hang on to you if you were in trouble? Would you hang on to it if *it* were?

Don’t be afraid to move your hands. After all, they are alive. But please keep holding hands a little longer. Say nothing, but think quietly for a moment of some way in which you feel superior to or further advanced than the person whose hand you are holding. If questioned later, you can always insist that it was the person on the other side you were thinking about. But there are things you can do better than the person next to you. What are those things? Don’t be afraid of truth. That is part of community. You are stronger or smarter or more advanced in some way than the person whose hand you are holding. That’s life. It is also what you have to offer – and what they have to gain. And it will be fine – something you can both be happy about – unless you get judgmental or scornful about it.

See? It’s fun to hold hands. But it can go either way, depending on whether we enjoy giving and receiving, or decide to be independent and scornful. Can you also imagine the person whose hand you are holding having some skill or gift or wisdom that is superior to your own? Can you also imagine being willing to receive something from them if they offered it? Most people think that the church’s trouble is that not enough people are willing to give (“It is more blessed to give than to receive”). But that is not the real truth. A much larger problem in the Christian Life is that most of us are unwilling to accept or receive. That is not an admonition; it is a statement of fact. Therefore, we have to work much harder to become gracious receivers, even of the love of God.

Imagine now that some person came bursting through the door full of anger and vengeance toward you and, at least in their mind, for some legitimate reason. How would it feel to have all these people with you and for you? What impact would that have on your accuser? Sometimes it’s good not to have to face things all alone.

Now, if you will, look at the hand you are holding. Turn it over, and back. Does it have lines, scars, calluses? What an amazing thing this hand is. Have you *any* notion where that hand has been? What it has done? What it has been through? Do you know how hard it has

worked? How many skills it has acquired? Look at it! How many times has it been hurt? How many times has it held on when something or someone – or life itself – depended on it? Has it killed? Has it caressed? Has it fed? Has it stolen? Has it struck? Has it carried? Has it crafted, and created? Has it been folded in prayer, and lifted in supplication? Do you realize what you hold, when you hold a hand?

Of course, you do know that everything we have just said and thought about holding hands is a parable of the church, right? It is an introduction to the endless layers of what it means to be a loving community.

Now notice that the hand is connected to other things: a wrist, a shoulder, a face ... a heart, a mind, a soul. Dare you look into the face? Can you look into the heart or mind? Can you touch a hand and not touch a soul?

Do you remember that God loves that hand, that face, and that soul more than any human mother ever loved her child? And God has dreams for it, plans for it, hopes for it – for that hand and face and soul. And you want to be part of those dreams and plans – to help with them, not hurt or harm or destroy them. That is the Road to Antioch. Jesus the Christ revealed such truth and possibility to us. Jesus the Holy Spirit invites us to walk in the Spirit and with each other – to walk the Path, to follow THE WAY ... together.