

WHO NEEDS CHURCH?

Isaiah 41:6-10
Romans 12: 3-18

Faith Community
May 4, 2008

Introduction

I stopped into the hospital room of a church member. As I looked around, the bulletin board was covered with cards, fresh flowers sat on the windowsill, and a small stack of today's cards lay on the table. I looked at the names on the cards and recognized most of them – they were from members of this church. They knew about this woman's surgery or heard about it in the Sunday prayers and sent a card.

As we talked the woman picked up one of the cards, "I recognize this name, but I can't put a face with it. Can you tell me who it is?" I tried to describe the ones who sent the card. The woman answered, "Well, I'm sure I would know them if I saw them."

Then she said, "That's something isn't it? That people would send me a card and maybe they can't put my name with a face either, but still they send a card. They care even though we're not close friends." "Yea," I said, "That's something, isn't it?"

I

In the church of Jesus Christ we care for each other – even if we aren't close friends. When someone's hurting, we respond. When people are going through tough times, we try to stand beside them. Every week cards are mailed, phone calls made, people visit because someone is mentioned in the morning prayer.

A person comes home from the hospital and a member shows up with a meal. Someone is going through a troubled time and they have the opportunity to talk with a Stephen Minister in a confidential, one-to-one conversation. In a time of sorrow or recovery someone from this congregation may arrive with a prayer shawl, explaining that the person making the shawl prayed for the recipient while she was making it. You can wear it as you pray for healing, knowing that you have a faith community standing with you.

One of the advantages of a small church is that people can pray with you and for you by name. There was an article in the Free Press a couple of years back about mega-churches. They interviewed a man who said how wonderful it was, when his wife was in the hospital, to be able to call the pastor and pray with him over the phone. When I read it I thought that most likely the pastor didn't know who that couple was, what they looked like, or anything about their history. Imagine how much better it would be if their pastor was there in the hospital room holding their hands and praying with them in person. One of the advantages of smaller churches is that they are personal.

One of our families called from Florida last week to be sure they were remembered in our prayers – it's that important. How many times have we heard people stand up here in church and thank the congregation for praying for them through difficult times? People who are out of town or on vacation call to ask to be remembered in prayer. The church is a community of faith that cares for, supports, and encourages each other.

II

We don't just share the difficult experiences; we share the joys as well. When we have good news we offer that joy in our prayers together. When we have accomplished something good, we thank God together. We celebrate the joys of life together. Our celebrations are from great achievements to minor joys.

We celebrate the world class accomplishments of members as well as birthdays, anniversaries, and graduations. When we have good news this is the place where we share it. Your joy makes us happy; your accomplishments make us all proud. As Paul wrote to the church in Rome, "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." That's what it means to be a faith community.

III

But the church reaches out beyond itself also. Partly because we are a community that supports each other, the church moves beyond itself. It stretches to help the hungry, sick, poor, lonely, and homeless. Maybe it is because we care about each other that we care for others too.

We also respond to the needs of hurting people because Christ told us to. Matthew 25 makes clear that when we feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned, it is as if we did it to Christ himself. Jesus isn't talking here about helping wealthy, famous people who make us look good being with them, but those who are considered least among us.

Christ draws us to get outside ourselves. He also draws us to get outside our church building and our close community in order to serve others in his name.

IV

The church is also a community that prays for you when you can't pray. This congregation forms words for your prayers when you aren't able to form them yourself. Sometimes life is so cruel to us that for a while we can't pray. Perhaps we're grieving and it hurts too much. Maybe we're going through a time when we're filled with doubt and can't make the prayers come. Maybe we're too angry at God to pray. In those bleak days the church prays in our place. The congregation carries us through that awful time. The church keeps praying when not all of its members are praying with it.

A pastor visited a grief-stricken family after a horrible loss. At the end of their visit the pastor asked, "Would you to pray together?" The man said, "I'm really sorry, Reverend, but I can't pray right now." The pastor said, "I understand. Please know the congregation will be praying for you."

The church keeps praying for us when we aren't able to pray. Hopefully the day will come when the one carried in prayer will be able to pray for another person whose pain is keeping him from praying.

V

Maybe the church believes for us when we are unable to believe. You don't have to have been in the church for too long to see that terrible things happen to very good people. A child dies and the whole order of the world is disrupted. Accidents happen and wonderful people are forced to go through harrowing experiences. People get angry with God, so angry that they set aside their faith for a while. We understand these things happen. Sometimes we go through such bad experiences that we don't know what we believe, or if we believe at all. In these times the church believes for us. The congregation carries us through our time of doubt or uncertainty or disbelief. The church can even help us by believing for us during the times when we find it hard to believe.

When I was a child I woke up early one morning and neither of my parents was home. A very strong member of our congregation had a husband who was an alcoholic, and that morning he was drunk and drove his extremely expensive car into a tree. He was killed. My father went with the man's wife to identify the body, and my mother went to their home so that when their only daughter woke up someone would be there. It was a horrible tragedy.

The woman was just trying to deal with that loss when a few years later that woman's only daughter, a teenager, contracted throat cancer and died. A short time later even her dog died. It was too much for her. She said, "I can't believe in a God of love." Who can blame her?

But that woman came to church almost every Sunday. She received the care and warmth of the congregation; she sang the hymns, listened to the scriptures and the sermons. I think she searched for hope. Maybe she reached out for a faith she couldn't grasp right then. I believe in those long, bleak days the church believed for her. They carried her.

Conclusion

Who needs the church? Those who are in pain and those who are joyful, those going through a weak time and those who are strong, those who pray with a loud clear voice and those who can't muster even a murmur, those who are excited and those who are depressed, those who have accomplished a great deal and those who have fallen flat on their faces, those elated and those in anguish.

God called us together for a reason.

Amen