

## Life Together

### 3 – Unbinding Your Heart

Micah 6:6-8

Psalms 133

Acts 2:1, 14, 32-47

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Second Sunday in Lent

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Some years ago a man checked into a hotel in France. It was about noon. As he was unpacking, he noticed the most delightful fragrance in the air. He thought the cleaning staff must have done a good job preparing the room until he opened the big wooden shutters and stepped out onto the balcony. It was a sunny day, the noon sun beaming down through a bright clear blue sky. The street below was filled with people, and the fragrance was even more pronounced and delightful from this balcony. Perplexed about the source of the aroma, he decided to go out for a walk. As he stepped out among the crowd on the street, he asked the doorman about the wonderful smell and was told, “Oh, it is the perfume factory down the street. These people you see out for their lunch break all work in the perfume factory. They are around those amazing aromas all day, so when they step out into the street the aroma sticks with them. It goes where they go. It permeates everything.

I would like to think and hope and pray that that is the effect South Highland Presbyterian Church has on us... and then that we have on Birmingham and on wherever we find ourselves as we go out from this perfume factory into the mission field. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his wonderful little book, **Life Together**, “It is a great gift of God’s grace that God gives us each other and enables us to gather visibly in this place to hear the Word and share in the sacraments.”<sup>i</sup> So when we go out from this place, the wonderful aroma goes with us. Paul told the Corinthians (and let me tell you, there was a stench of corruption in that notorious city where he had built up the church): “Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him...for we are the aroma of Christ to God.”<sup>ii</sup> I wonder, today, how is your perfume?

We are in the midst of an incredible experiment at South Highland of **Unbinding Our Hearts**. We are seeking to grow fresh new ways in our relationship with God, through prayer, study of scripture, fellowship with others in small clusters, all to the end of becoming able to say a good word for Jesus, that is--to give voice to the hope that is in us, and be able to share our faith in some real, authentic, significant ways with someone outside the Church. We want others to know the source of the fragrance. We want to find valid ways that work for us to share the love of God in Jesus Christ so that his aroma may spread to folks who need him.

Our lesson today from the Acts of the Apostles brings us to the epicenter of activity of God’s Holy Spirit, as it explodes upon the tiny community of believers huddled together after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. This passage is a bit atypical

for Lent as we have fast-forwarded the tape beyond Jesus' actual journey to the cross and have been reminded of the powerful after-shock effects that emerge upon his followers after these events in Jerusalem of his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. What happens that day at Pentecost is not simply for an annual celebration of the festival, and Pentecost is at an inconvenient time because you are at the beach. What happens at Pentecost continues to shape our day-to-day life together, and it shows us how this aroma of life can change us and our community. The secret comes in a balance of loving, real relationships: a trinity of relationships – with God, with others in the world, with others in the community of faith.

I sense some amazing things are happening in our lives as we are becoming open to God coming and unbinding us. I have been deeply moved by your enthusiastic response to this unbinding invitation. The personal sharing by Michelle Grabarchek, Henry Laws and Brody Black has been deeply encouraging. The intensity of the Ash Wednesday services when so many of you came to worship... to express your deep yearning for God to come and to do something significant in your life...and you offered yourself as a more available receiver of what God wanted to do in you during this Lenten Season was significant. Seeing so many of you eagerly participating in weekly small groups is uplifting.

Last Sunday I was overwhelmed at the response, and quite surprised really as hundreds of you came down the aisles during the offertory and pinned prayer requests for people and situations here on the prayer wall. Now we are praying as never before. We are becoming an Acts 29 congregation. Remember there are only 28 chapters in Acts. We are becoming the 29<sup>th</sup>, as a congregation that is continuing day-by-day the energizing transforming work of God that began on Pentecost. Pentecost really is not about one wild day in the Spirit. Pentecost is the pattern for how we can live day-to-day and how Christ's aroma grows in us and flows forth from us.

Elton Trueblood, the great Quaker Christian teacher once said, "If God, as we believe, is truly revealed in the life of Christ, the most important thing to Him is the creating of centers of loving fellowship, which in turn infect the world."<sup>iii</sup> That is what we are seeking to be. How greatly we are needed as such a center right here on this corner, growing stronger day-by-day, more and more loving, more and more infectious.

The secret is in a balance of relationships: a real vital relationship with God, real vital relationships with others in the world, and real vital relationships with others in the Church. You see on the diagram in your bulletin how these three relationships work together and interpenetrate each other.

This trinity of balanced relationships actually begins right in the heart of God's own being as Three-in-One, Triune. The Holy God who has revealed himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a God of relationships within God's own inner being. There is a dynamic, ongoing social networking between these three aspects of our One Holy God. There is an inner mysterious loving, intimate, communal, gracious exchange

going on within the heart of God that is living and vibrant. So how does this inner being of God reach us?

Peter shows us. Peter is used both as example and interpreter of this wonderful balance of relationships as he stands up on Pentecost in the aftermath of that astonishing manifestation of the Spirit's Power, seen in the fire, felt in the wind, heard in the tongues. Peter interprets for the community and those on the streets what has happened to him and to them all because of the great things God has done.

## I

**First, Peter is renewed in his relationship with God.** When we last heard Peter in Luke's account, he had three times denied even knowing Jesus as he stood in the courtyard outside the high priest's house. Asked about being with Jesus, he replied, "Man, I do not know what you are talking about!"<sup>iv</sup> Then on Easter Peter runs to the tomb and examines the empty linen cloths in which Jesus' body had been wrapped. "Then he went home, amazed at what had happened." At that point we do not know what Peter will decide about all this. He must have been so ashamed. He must have been so confused. We wonder how he will finally respond.

As Luke begins his second book, the Acts of the Apostles, we find out. There is Peter, a living example, first one up, speaking before the eleven and those in the streets of Jerusalem, about this Jesus.

"You that are Israelites listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you... this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death... of that all of us are witnesses."<sup>v</sup>

From "*I don't know who Jesus is,*" Peter is now saying "*Let me tell you who he is.*" God has been at work in Peter's heart, forgiving him of his denial, and assuring him he will still be used mightily in spreading the Gospel, as he is that day at Pentecost.

We will never be able to express who Jesus is to us until we are in an ongoing renewed and renewing relationship with God. Daily renewing through prayer and scripture is essential so we can be strengthened within and then, as Peter's first Letter says, "be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you, with gentleness and reverence."<sup>vi</sup> Peter is renewed in his relationship with God.

## II

**Second, Peter is renewed in his relationships with others in the larger world.** Pentecost turns out to be quite public, and people in the streets who are just out buying their morning vegetables experience the strange manifestations of God's Spirit. To them Peter speaks a clarifying word. He is not simply saying a nice little word for Jesus like

“have a blest day,” but he is passionately testifying and exhorting people. He has a heart to reach those who are outside the faith.

In my own life, I have been interested in those on the outside. For whatever reason, I never was drawn to closed societies of Christians who sort of did the holy huddle and excluded by practice those who were not yet fully in the club. I have tried to—as Sam Shoemaker said—“stand by the door”. So I have engaged in things like a social fraternity in college, community boards and activities in the pastorate where I encountered people who are outside the Church and tried to help build a bridge for them to walk over.

Last year our Minister of Music, Dr. Philip Copeland, talked me into singing with the 150-voice Alabama Symphony Chorus which he directs and which meets here on Monday nights. I tried all the good excuses of why I did not have time, but then I gave it a try and got hooked. It was fun singing great works like Bach’s “B Minor Mass”, Handel’s “Messiah”, and Durufle’s “Requiem”. I think Philip thought he could get me off his back about having our Chancel Choir sing these great works here in church if he got me in that choir. Well, I am still bugging him; and we are singing more and more of such great works in our growing talented choir. So thanks, Philip!

But what has happened as a side effect of being involved in that Alabama Symphony Chorus is lots of conversations with folks about spiritual issues and God questions. Conversations about some things that church members will not always bring up with me. We need to nurture our relationships out in the community.

### III

But what about right here in the church? **Peter is renewed in his relationships with others in the Church.** He messed up royally that night he denied Jesus. Now he has received God’s forgiveness and that of others in the community.

How are our relationships here with one another? Since earliest days, Christians used familial terms for one another, like “sister and brother.” Do we treat one another as members of a healthy family should? Are we open and honest with one another? Can we share deep hurts and struggles as well as high hopes and aspirations with one another in the appropriate setting? I do not mean standing up before the congregation and announcing some heinous sin. I mean being real and authentic with one another, and trusting one another enough to be able to share some dark, difficult things we are going through in our lives.

I had a New Testament professor at Princeton named Christian Beker. He was a world renowned expert on the writings of the Apostle Paul, and he had been through a difficult, painful divorce. I remember he said one day in a lecture about intimate Christian Community, almost as an aside, “When I was going through my divorce, the last place I would ever have shared my struggle was with the people in my church.” I thought, how sad...yet how common that attitude is. Too often the church has responded to such sharing with harsh judgment rather than compassionate caring.

My friends we need to be real with one another. Jesus came in a real human body for us. He needed other real human bodies around him to encourage and comfort him. Remember when he received that drink of water from a woman at a well, and that fragrant ointment from Mary after dinner, and that boat ride from Peter? We, too, need real bodies around us, people with whom we are in community and with whom we can share our struggles, our hurts and our hopes. We need to be willing to extend forgiveness to one another and to receive forgiveness from one another. In a world of Facebook, Internet, and iPads, we need the real social networking site found in face-to-face, side-by-side community life together.

Remember that teaching Jesus gave in his Sermon on the Mount if you are about to offer your gift at the altar and there remember your sister or brother has something against you. He said, "Leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."<sup>vii</sup>

People have hurt one another by not consistently relating to one another as family members within the church, or, as someone said to me this week, by the dichotomy between what a person said and did on Sunday and what that same person said and did to them during the week in business dealings.

We need to keep a healthy healing balance going here at South Highland in the way we interact with one another. Has someone hurt you? Do you have a grudge against someone that you have been nurturing a long time? Do you need to ask someone for forgiveness? Do you need to hold out an olive branch to someone with whom you have barely been in relationship for some time?

Acts, Chapter 2 shows us an imperfect group of people who are growing closer to God, closer to each other and closer to people on the outside. Worshiping and praying together, eating and laughing together, sharing their resources, spending a lot of time with one another in the temple and in their own homes. They are forgiving each other, praising God, and learning to be more like their Master Jesus... together. The upshot of it all is the world outside takes notice. They begin to have "the good will of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."<sup>viii</sup>

#### IV

Today, I want to ask you: Will you ask God to show you where you need to work most in your relationships? Is it with God? Is it with someone at work or school or the neighborhood? Is it with a fellow church member? Who do you need to work on your relationships with? You may want to write that person's initials on a sticky note and put it on the prayer wall and pray about it. But don't stop there--write a note to them, send an e-mail or text (Don't Facebook them!)--go and initiate reconciliation.

You know what? I think if you will ask God to lead you and give God time and space to speak to you He will direct you into healthy, balanced relationships with God,

the world outside, and the Christian community. When we all do that together, my friends, I believe there is going to be a tremendous upsurging of hope and joy and welcome that those outside our doors are going to sense. They will come to find what all this is about. We will be like those first believers springing from the events in Jerusalem on Pentecost, of whom it was said, “These people are absurdly happy, absolutely fearless, and always getting into trouble.”

“Thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ in God.”

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<sup>i</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, p.18

<sup>ii</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:14

<sup>iii</sup> Elton Trueblood, The Company of the Committed

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 22:60

<sup>v</sup> Acts 2:22-24,32

<sup>vi</sup> 1 Peter 3:15

<sup>vii</sup> Matthew 5:23-24

<sup>viii</sup> Acts 2:46-47