

We are a Church Family through . . . The Building up of Community

Or:

April 13, 2008

Year A: Fourth Sunday of Easter

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

I am a product of rural Nebraska. I, my father, and my grandfather all have served churches in rural parts of this state. And so when I come across some cute sayings about this unique lifestyle I collect them. Here is a sampling of a few. *You know you are from Rural Nebraska if . . .*

During a storm, you check the cattle before the kids.

There's a tornado warning and the whole town is outside watching the tornado.

The Husker quarterback is hurt and you are hoping it is the first thing on the 5:00 news. . . and it is.

You are on a first name basis with the County Sheriff.

Your mayor is also the doctor, barber, or insurance agent.

You call the wrong number by mistake and talk to the person for an hour anyway.

You know cow pies are not made of beef.

It takes three minutes to reach your destination and it is all the way across town.

You call lunch dinner and dinner supper.

If you hope to get a new snow blower for Christmas.

You instinctively wave to the other driver when you meet a car on the road.

The topic of weather usually comes up in most conversations.

If meat and potatoes are served at the vast majority of your meals.

When it rains, everybody's smiling.

You've never met any celebrities.

You measure distance in minutes.

You've ridden the school bus for an hour each way.

You've ever had to switch from "heat" to "air conditioning" in the same day.

You install security lights on your house and garage but leave both unlocked.

You know what a "Runza" is.

You know the answer to the question, "Is this Heaven?"¹

And if I could I would add – you know you are from rural Nebraska when the church you belong to makes you feel like family.

Today, our sermon focuses on this church's third Core Value. We've already touched on Christian Fellowship and Belonging and if you've missed those sermons or would like a refresher you can read those on our web-site: www.chadronumc.org. Now we address: We are a Church Family through . . .

¹ "You know you are from rural Nebraska if . . ." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part I.* 38.

The Building up of Community. This is based on another passage from Matthew. [Matthew 22:36-40 \(NRSV\)](#)

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

³⁷He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

At the heart of this scripture is the word "love" and that concept of love is the cornerstone of our Core Value.

In a United Methodist periodical, Alvin Horton writes a story about a woman who exemplifies this value. Alvin says that whenever he traveled to Alabama to visit her, she never had to ask what he wanted for dinner. She knew his favorite dish; for she made the best spaghetti in the world. In fact, Alvin writes, "my wife uses her recipe to this day." And when he conjures up images of his dad, who died when he was 14, Alvin sees him sitting at her table, politely smiling at her stories, and stuffing down a second helping of her noodles and marinara sauce.

Alvin says that he met this woman when he was 12. She was the mother of his best friend in school. And they would often play together in their home. When Alvin's Dad passed away four years after his mother died, he went to live with a pastor and his wife for a year and eventually found his way to her door, seeking a home for his teen-age years. "The aroma of the spaghetti must have drawn me in," Alvin writes. "I can still remember the evening I sat on the piano bench in her family room, in the incandescent warmth of a lamp nearby." And in the halting speech of a 15-year-old, he asked, "How would you like another son?"

For the next 32 years Alvin would eat her spaghetti, listen to her stories, and soak in the warmth of a passion she had for living that defied the limitations life imposed on her. She survived polio as a child, although she suffered with its effects all her life; she married later in life and created a home that had room enough for two adopted children in spite of mental and emotional stresses that would have destroyed the average soul. When she took Alvin's brother and him into her home, she went to work using a cane that would eventually be replaced by a wheelchair.

Zera M. Fogleman didn't have much, Alvin concludes. But what she had was enough. God took her life, like a master chef would take a bowl of wet noodles, and created some of the best spaghetti he'd ever had the pleasure to savor. She didn't have a lot of money; she didn't even live in a mansion, but what she had she gave away in bowlfuls. What she had was enough.

Alvin wrote this article soon after he heard the news of her death. He will always remember the wonderful meals that this mother to all was able to share.²

When I think of this passage from Matthew, when I look at this Core Value, it reminds me of that story about a woman and her love. You see when we build up the community it is not about a feeling, it is a commitment to love in action. You see when we talk about love – especially the kind that Jesus refers

² "Bowl full of spaghetti." *Ibid.* 36.

to here – it is not the kind that my daughters see on Disney or play out with their Barbies. This is the kind of love that makes you stand up and do something about it. This is the kind of love that sends a parent into a burning building to retrieve their child. This is the kind of love that sends thousands of protestors into the streets over a cause they believe in. Why else would someone stand out in the cold and protest the carrying of an Olympic flame. This is the kind of love that is more than just a feeling, it is the kind that you can not let go of.

Some years ago on a hot summer day in south Florida, a little boy decided to go for a swim in the old swimming hole behind his house. In a hurry to dive into the cool water, he ran out the back door, leaving behind shoes, socks, and shirt as he went. He flew into the water, not realizing that as he swam toward the middle of the lake, an alligator was swimming toward the shore.

His mother in the house was looking out the window and saw the two as they got closer and closer together. In utter fear, she ran toward the water, yelling to her son as loudly as she could. Hearing her voice, the little boy became alarmed and made a U-turn to swim to his mother. It was too late. Just as he reached her, the alligator reached him.

From the dock, the mother grabbed her little boy by the arms just as the alligator snatched his legs. That began an incredible tug-of-war between the two. The alligator was much stronger than the mother, but the mother was much too passionate to let go. A farmer happened to drive by, heard her screams, raced from his truck, took aim and shot the alligator.

Remarkably, after weeks and weeks in the hospital, the little boy survived.

His legs were extremely scarred by the vicious attack of the animal, and, on his arms, were deep scratches where his mother's fingernails dug into his flesh in her effort to hang on to the son she loved.

The newspaper reporter who interviewed the boy after the trauma, asked if he would show him his scars. The boy lifted his pant legs. And then, with obvious pride, he said to the reporter, "But look at my arms. I have great scars on my arms, too. I have them because my Mom wouldn't let go."³

Isn't that the meaning of family? A church family? We will not let go. No matter the conflict, no matter what has happened in the past. We will not let go. I have been pastoring for almost 12 years now and unfortunately I have seen families broken. I have seen grown brothers and sisters who won't talk to each other, let alone sit on the same side of the church with each other. I have seen their kids go in separate directions only because their parents couldn't get along. But I have also seen that when one of their own – I'm talking about a family member – enters the hospital or is near death, those differences melt away (at least until after the funeral). But in that moment – when the family needs each other – they will not let go.

This is the kind – the type of love – that we are talking about. It is our Core Value for we are a Church Family through the Building up of Community. In the Central part of our state a unique phenomenon happens this time of the year – Sandhill Cranes are seen localized in that small strip of land along the Platte River. When we lived in Aurora we often we see these beautiful birds

³ "My mom wouldn't let go." *Ibid.*, Part V. 19.

filling themselves up on corn stalks as we traveled to Grand Island. They are big birds with a unique sound. Besides flying just through this small patch of land they are also unique in what they do for each other. Bruce Larson in his book *Wind and Fire* says, "These large birds, who fly great distances across continents, have three remarkable qualities. First, they rotate leadership. No one bird stays out in front all the time. Second, they choose leaders who can handle turbulence. And then, all during the time one bird is leading, the rest are honking their affirmation.

"That's not a bad model for the church," Larson says. "Certainly we need leaders who can handle turbulence and who are aware that leadership ought to be shared. But most of all, we need a church where we are all honking encouragement."⁴

How do you build up a community – you honk encouragement. How do you make a church family – you honk encouragement. This kind of love that Jesus talks about is not the mushy, feely stuff, it is the kind of love that says each one of us is important. It is the kind of love that says we've got our differences, but when it matters, we'll be there for you. It is the kind of love that says we come from different walks of life, different experiences, different ways of viewing God, but when your neighbor is in need – we will respond, we will act, for we are committed. The building up of the community means that we are not alone, nor should we be, for we have a church family loving us with their community, loving us with their care, loving us with their action, and always honking our encouragement.

Jake Porter was born with chromosomal fragile-X syndrome, a common cause of mental retardation. Jake couldn't read. He could barely write his name. But Jake loved football, and the 17-year-old faithfully attended every practice at his school, Northwest High in McDermott, Ohio.

Jake's coach Dave Frantz wanted to do something special for Jake. So before a game against Waverly High in the fall of 2002, Frantz called his friend Derek Dewitt, the head coach at Waverly. Frantz suggested that both teams allow Jake to run one play at the end of the game, assuming the game wasn't on the line. Jake would get the ball and take a knee, and the game would end. Dewitt agreed.

So, with Waverly leading 42-0 and five seconds left in the game, Frantz called a timeout. Jake trotted out to the huddle, and the two coaches met at midfield. *Sports Illustrated's* Rick Reilly picks up the story:

Fans could see there was a disagreement. Dewitt was shaking his head and waving his arms. After a ref stepped in, play resumed and Jake got the ball. He started to genuflect, as he's practiced all week. Teammates stopped him and told him to run, but Jake started going in the wrong direction. The back judge rerouted him toward the line of scrimmage.

Suddenly, the Waverly defense parted like peasants for the king and urged him to go on his grinning sprint to the end zone. Imagine having 21 teammates on the field. In the stands mothers cried and fathers roared. Players on both sidelines held their helmets to the sky and whooped.

⁴ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/l/leadership.htm>

Apparently when the coaches met before the big play, (Jake's coach) Frantz had reminded Dewitt of the plan, that Jake would simply take a knee. But Dewitt wasn't satisfied. He said, "No, I want him to score." Dewitt called his defense over and said, "They're going to give the ball to number 45. Do not touch him! Open up a hole and let him score! Understand?"

Jake had the run of his life, all because of Dewitt's unselfish decision: "I want him to score."⁵

Now that is love – love of a neighbor. This is what we value as a Church Family that Builds up Community. This is what it means to be A Church Family that Makes a Difference. Amen.

⁵ Encouragement. *Illustrations*.