

“If It Ain’t Local, It Ain’t Real”

Rev. Bob Frederick
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It has been eight years since I last stood behind this pulpit. It doesn’t appear any different now than it did then, and I should add, do those of you who were here eight years ago. But what gives me reason to rejoice most this morning are not the familiar faces of eight or more years ago, but the many new faces – the ones belonging to those of you for whom this is a new church and who, depending upon your age, may well be celebrating the 75th and even 100th anniversaries of this church.

In the early 1950’s when I was a graduate student at Chicago Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago Divinity School—which at that time shared a common faculty – I had a professor of sociology of religion named Sam Kincheloe. Sam was born and grew up in that northeastern corner of Appalachia that extends just a bit into Ohio. In spite of Sam’s forty or more years away from there – first in professional study of the urban church and later teaching in major universities – he never forgot his upbringing. He never lost his Appalachian heritage including its language. One of Sam’s favorite expressions was: “IF IT AIN’T LOCAL, IT AIN’T REAL.”

An example Sam occasionally used was when someone asked us directions for driving from Chicago to Los Angeles. Now, keep in mind that this was before the days of MapQuest or even of Interstates. Sam said that if the directions offered simply were to take US Route 66 all the way to LA, those directions wouldn’t be very helpful. Why? Because that didn’t explain to that person who was perhaps on the corner of 57th and Woodlawn, on the south side of Chicago, just what were all the streets and turns he or she would have to make through the city before finally reaching US 66. “IF IT AIN’T LOCAL, IT AIN’T REAL.”

But Sam’s concern wasn’t actually about travel. Rather, it was about the church and how you and I best get to know and understand the church. This doesn’t come about by just looking at the church in general, or its major components – Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant – or even one of its denominations – Methodist, Baptist or UCC. For any of us to truly to know and understand the church, we must start out with one local church. Because if the Christian Church AIN’T LOCAL, IT AIN’T REAL.

Sam was in good company in thinking that way. For that’s how the Apostle Paul thought as well, following his mid-life conversion to Christianity. He realized that if this new religion was going to make a true difference in the world, it would be through local churches. And thus it was to the establishment of local churches that Paul put most of his own energies for the remainder of his life. Paul’s approach was to work with a single church at a time. He would go into a city inviting, encouraging, teaching and praying with the people who had begun to gather in their new faith.

We know today about some of those churches, like the ones in Corinth, Ephesus, and Philippi, through the letters Paul wrote to them following his visits. But these letters, mind you, were not 'form' letters sent to all of them. No. Each letter was written to just one local church and focused on the difficulties that church was facing, and on its successes. But mostly he focused on just how much the people of that church meant to him. IF IT AIN'T LOCAL, IT AIN'T REAL.

You and I are here this morning to celebrate 50 years of one local church in Haslett, Michigan. This church is more than just a dot on the map. It is more than just one line on a listing of tens of thousands of churches that exist in the world today. This local church in Haslett, Michigan is REAL. And it had its own unique beginning. Back in 1954, most new churches in this country were started as a result of national and state denominational offices working to establish congregations in places where the post World War II population was expanding – especially on the edges of metropolitan areas. Or sometimes a new church in the 1950's began when an already established church decided, rather than grow large and larger itself, it would form another congregation in another part of the same city. This is what Peoples Church in East Lansing did in forming the Edgewood United Church of Christ on Hagadorn Road. And Edgewood UCC, as some of you may know, is also, this morning, celebrating its 50th year.

But neither of these examples is the way this local church in Haslett began. This was truly a self-starting church. People here in town started Haslett church; most of them newly arrived in the area. Many were former G.I.'s and their spouses. And if I have the story straight, the impetus – more than anything else – for them to start this church, was the arrival of children into their lives. Most of us can identify with that, can't we? Because it's what also brought us either into the church, or back to the church – the arrival of children into our lives, and wanting for them a religious and moral education. So these folks, in 1954, began talking to one another, and lamenting the fact that the choices for such an education at that time in Haslett, were quite limited. So maybe – just maybe – they would have to take matters into their own hands and do something about it. So they called a meeting – a few of you here this morning may have been at that meeting – held in the home of Conrad and Rose Haney. And who would have believed that on April 25, 1954 – exactly one month and two days following that first meeting, a worship service would be held above the old township hall and fire station on the northeast corner of Haslett and Okemos Roads with 145 men, women and children in attendance? The rest is history – your history and mine, as members and former members of this local church.

It has always struck me that one of the best decisions this brand new congregation made was in its choice of a name: Haslett COMMUNITY Church. Of course, back in the 1950's "Community" was a common name for churches that were not affiliated with any denomination. Which was true of this church. Its denominational ties were to come later. But the word "Community" as part of a church's name back then, often implied more than just that. It implied: "Everyone is welcome". In other words, this church in Haslett was making clear that it had no intentions of being a doctrinal church, or a creedal church, or a church with a hard and fast believer's test for membership. To the contrary,

the intention was that the doors of this church were to remain wide open to everyone. To those who were certain and to those who were uncertain – alike. To believers like Mary and to doubters like Thomas – alike. For that’s community – isn’t it? Real community. As Bishop Leslie Newbegin of the Church of South India once put it when speaking about inviting people into the church, “It’s one beggar telling another beggar where the bread is at”. This may be what brought most of us into this church – someone told us that “this is where the bread is at”. And it doesn’t take us very long, once we are inside, to discover that the bread this church has to offer comes, not primarily through either the beliefs it teaches or the devotion it urges, but rather the bread this church has to offer comes through the community it creates. No. Let’s make that plural. The bread this church has to offer comes through the communities this church creates. Because if this church is going to adequately nourish, it needs to create for us TWO kinds of communities.

In his book, *Better Together*, Harvard sociologist, Robert Putnam, gives names to these two kinds of community. One is the BONDING COMMUNITY and the other is the BRIDGING COMMUNITY. Both very much apply to the church. Let’s look at them. A BONDING COMMUNITY is most likely to come about when we are in the company of people much like ourselves; people with whom we share many of the same values; hold to many of the same hopes; have gone through many of the same experiences.

I recall reading about a New York City emergency room physician, who within an hour or two following the April 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building, flew there and joined other ER personnel from across the country. They formed into teams, searched through the wreckage for bodies, and tended to those who, somehow miraculously, were still alive. Two weeks later the doctor returned to New York City and was interviewed by a reporter who asked him, “What was the first thing you did when you got back?” He didn’t give the expected answer – he had taken a hot shower or a long nap or dined out with friends. No. The doctor said, “The first thing I did was to compile a list of the names and phone numbers of the members of my team and the pictures I had taken of each of them”. The reporter asked why this had been so important? The doctor replied. “Because what we went through together bonded us in ways that will continue to affect each one of us for the rest of our lives.”

Not so dramatically, perhaps, bonding happens among many of us here in this church. We go through a lot with one another. This comes out in our sharing, on Sunday mornings, our joys and concerns. We do this during worship and before and after worship. We suffer with each other. We serve chicken soup to each other. We rejoice with each other. We are drawn close through our similar life experiences.

I would like to speak personally for a moment. When I retired eight years ago, Clare and I, quite intentionally, cut our ties with this church – partly for our own sake, but even more for you in this congregation as you searched and welcomed a new pastor (and what a wonderful choice you made) and began with him a new chapter in the life of this church. For four or five years we worshipped elsewhere. But then I underwent major surgery. And even when one has a concerned and supportive family, it still can be a

lonely experience. It was that way for me – save one thing- the personal response of so many of you. It made Clare and I realize how much we missed our bond with Haslett Community Church. So with Kurt’s blessing, we came back. And fair warning. You’re stuck with us. This brings to mind the hired man in the poem by Robert Frost when he writes: “Home is where they have to take you in”. Yes, through fifty years, this church for so many people has truly been a bonding community. But as I mentioned earlier, for you and me and others to be adequately fed by the church, we must create more than just a BONDING community. We must also create a BRIDGING community. And that is, of course, much more difficult to do. The bonding community places us with people who in many ways are similar to us, folks with whom we can quite readily feel comfortable and trust. However, the bridging community may do almost the opposite – placing us with people who in many ways are much different from us and with whom we are not very comfortable and feel no sense of trust.

It was to these differences that the Apostle Paul had to contend when going to the cosmopolitan city of Corinth intent on establishing a church there. Seeing the varied population of that city, even among those who had learned of Christ, must indeed have given him some second thoughts. He realized that it would be far easier to organize several churches in the city rather than just one. Each individual church could appeal to people of different economic, social, ethnic or religious groups and readily create bonding communities. But Paul dismissed that idea. Why? Because in his heart he knew that to establish the Church of Jesus Christ in Corinth meant establishing just one church – creating a truly bridging community with all people breaking bread together. Yes! Romans with Greeks; Egyptians with Syrians; Jews with gentiles; common folk with the elite; men with women -no matter how great their respective differences in terms of expectations, traditions, life experiences or in ways of perceiving both God and the world.

The church must be living proof, insisted Paul, of the inclusiveness and oneness of all people, originating in the Almighty. By so doing, the church would become an example to the world of how the human race could live together. Thus it was a bridging community that this church in Corinth committed itself to creating. And we know from the letters Paul later wrote to this church that it experienced both failure and success in this effort.

What about the local church in Haslett, Michigan? In its 50 years, has it been a bridging community? Has it served as an example to the world of what it means for the entire human race to live together? One of the challenges we face in becoming a bridging community is that our membership has always been quite homogenous. Most of us are not only Caucasian, but we are western European in our backgrounds. We hold to many of the same traditions, both religious and secular. And though it would not be true of those served by our food bank, very few of us here on Sunday morning have lived in poverty, and fewer still of us here on Sunday morning have lived even a portion of our lives subject to oppression, hate, or prejudice.

But this is not to suggest there haven’t been differences among us during these 50 years. There have some theological ones, I’m sure, but mostly we dealt with those of social

implications: differences during the early 1960's regarding the church's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement; differences in the late 60's over the Vietnam War; differences in the 70's regarding the Women's Movement; differences today on the war in Iraq.

On a somewhat lighter note, when I came here in 1966, the Sacrament of Communion was served by men - always by men in dark suits, white shirts and ties; marching lockstep up the center aisle. But it didn't take long before some women in this bridging community of ours insisted that it was their privilege, too, to serve communion. Nor did it take long for some young people in this bridging community of ours to insist that no one should have to wear either a tie or a skirt to come to church.

The church as a bridging community- we don't allow our differences to separate us from one another. During the last few months, we have heard this concern addressed by various church leaders. For the Council of United Methodist Bishops the issue of ordaining lesbians and gays continues to cause much disagreement. And it did so most recently when the Pacific Northwest region of the United Methodist Church refused to defrock a pastor who was living in a same sex relationship. The Council of Bishops issued a statement saying: "In a moment such as this, we remember our unity in Christ does not depend on all of us holding the same opinion. Rather, in Jesus Christ we are bound together by love that transcends our differences and causes us to stay at the table with each other."

On Easter Sunday, the Pope, speaking to tens of thousands of Roman Catholics in St. Peter's Square, with uniformed and plain clothed officers all around the square and on rooftops for fear of a threatened terrorist attack, called on those whom he referred to as the children of Abraham-namely Christians, Jews and Muslims - to re-discover their shared bonds.

Yes, the community of the Church: A BONDING community; A BRIDGING community. We celebrate, this morning, 50 years of effort on the part of this local church in Haslett, Michigan to create both of these kinds of communities. For we know in our hearts that this is the only way by which both we, and those who follow after us, will experience the Almighty not only here but in the world. Amen.