

“War on Poverty”

Acts 2:42-47

May 15, 2011

John Rosemond is a family therapist who writes a column about parenting that is printed in newspapers all over the country, including Raleigh's *News & Observer*. Boy, does he know how to push parental buttons! His articles are confrontational and almost belligerently critical of parenting in 2011 which he believes is too lax. That said, he recently posed a very thoughtful question for parents: “Are you raising a good neighbor?” He argued that more than making children happy, more than teaching them how to meet their own needs, parenting is – and I quote - “...about raising an adult who will be a good neighbor, someone who will be helpful and courteous and respectful and compassionate and charitable and responsible and so on.” He takes that further saying, “The only proper goal of child-rearing in America is to strengthen America. It is not all about the child. It is about one's responsibility to this country.”

As a Christian, I would say that John Rosemond's thinking is too lax. Jesus said something about God so loving the WHOLE world, and for us, *are you raising a good neighbor* is part of a bigger question which is *Are you raising a good disciple?* That's not just a question for parents. That is a question for every person in this church – for our committee members, our deacons, our elders, our Board – are we raising and developing and sending out good disciples?

Before we answer, the book of Acts is a good reference point, a reality check – a book like a *Discipleship for Dummies*. And, if we were to go on Amazon.com and click on “look inside this book,” we would find discipleship instructions tucked into stories of people who believed they were a part of a bigger plot. The table of contents would include 5 chapters: chapter 1 – devotion to the apostles' teaching; chapter 2: fellowship; chapter 3: breaking of bread; chapter 4: prayers, and chapter 5: awe and wonder. Then, we'd have an appendix A: All things in common: sell your possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds as any have need. Granted, the early church believed Jesus was already on his return flight to earth, so there was no need for personal possessions or career advancement or pre-planning. There was just worship, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. They spent time together.

Because of that, they knew each other's quirks. They knew that during potluck dinners, little Mary does not want her corn to touch her peas, and God forbid that a beet touches anything. They knew that if you called on Dan to pray, you'd better settle in for a long winter's nap because your head would be bowed and your eyes closed for quite a while as Dan led you to the throne of grace. They knew that Becky was quick to take offense and slow to listen, but that her buddy, Tom, could usually smooth things over with his sense of humor and kindness. They knew how to reach other. They knew how to pray with each other. They knew the challenges of sharing their lives with each other. Sometimes, that sharing felt so good - like a cold drink of water on a hot summer day, and other times, it felt like the sting of fire ants crawling into your skin and leaving you red faced and teary-eyed. But, on all days, that cold drink of water or that sting was a part of something so big, so full of the Spirit that you wanted to be a part of it - good or bad - because it meant you were alive. It meant that your life mattered...to others. It meant that what you say and what you do is important – eternally important.

It is! What happens between us and God AND what happens between us and each other is more important than we know. While on a speaking tour in the United States, Mother Teresa made a few remarks on poverty in America. If anybody was qualified to speak about poverty, it

was Mother Teresa. Her insight was that our nation's worst poverty was not financial but relational. We have a serious poverty of relationship, she said.

We are not connected, nor do we care to be. She has a point. I hear the sharp language people use when they talk to each other in the mall parking lot, and we're not connected. I read the words people use in editorials to express their opinions, and we're not connected. I watch families sitting down in restaurants and spending their meal together texting others. I know how it feels to be pouring out my heart in conversation only to have the other person take a phone call...poverty of relationship, but it does not have to be that way here.

Acts outlines strategies for the war on poverty used by the first 3000 converts – they studied, they fellowshiped, they broke bread, they prayed – they spent much time together, and instead of poverty of relationship, they had glad and generous hearts. Wonders and signs. Awe. Now, nineteen centuries later, we need to understand that in between these wonderful stories of joy and growth in the early church, we also have stories of difference and conflict. For starters, the early church had to deal with the divisive question of whether to let the Gentiles in on the good news. I mean, come on! That was a REALLY big problem that required a called board meeting with Robert's Rules of order, and Paul pulling out his hair, and a very dramatic dream for Peter – all to get the message that God's plan included everybody. And then there were other problems: right after Luke says that everyone shared what they had, two people are found to have NOT shared everything and lied about, AND each of them drops dead when confronted with what they had done. This must have caused at least a little talk in the church afterward.

And then there was grumbling among the Greek converts who complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. So they had another board meeting and designated seven people to be deacons who would distribute the food fairly, so the apostles wouldn't have to dirty up their hands and concentrate on preaching, teaching, and praying. Of course, right away one of the deacons, Stephen, starts to preach, teach and pray – the apostles' job! Nobody can convince me that THAT didn't hit somebody the wrong way. And, yet, these early people were not yet so poverty stricken that they stomped off in a huff.

Their relationships through Christ determined who they were. It drove how they spent their time – with each other in worship and fellowship. It drove how they spent their money – for anyone who had need. It drove how they spent their energy – on prayer and praising God and having the good will of all the people. It drove everything about their lives, and their lives took off. Awe and many wonders and signs and glad and generous hearts! I want me some of that!

So, what did they do again? Studied? My plate is already too full. Worshiped? How often? Because Sunday is my only day to sleep in. Fellowshiped – up to a point, but I don't want the church in my business. Broke bread – you never know who washed their hands at these potlucks. Prayer – I don't know how. The turning point for those first converts was their willingness to try something different. They didn't just break bread, they broke out!

Modern day disciples can be cynical of the power of these lame spiritual things. And, modern day disciples can be quite at home in spiritual ruts. And, instead of good discipleship, we sprinkle a little Jesus here and there and expect him to show up when we are in crisis. But, do you know what? To raise good disciples, we have to be good disciples. And, to be good disciples, we need an experience of the risen Christ every day. We need to encounter him at the table, in worship, in prayer, in the lives of the poor, in the eyes of those around us. We need to teach our children to do the same. We need to make sure our children grow into disciples and not into poverty. They will follow what we do.

One of Harry Chapin's lesser known songs goes like this:

*The little boy went first day of school. He got some crayons and started to draw.  
 He put colors all over the paper for colors was what he saw.  
 And the teacher said, "What are you doin', young man? "I'm paintin' flowers he said.  
 She said, "It's not the time for art young man and anyway flowers are green and red.  
 There's a time for everything, young man and a way it should be done.  
 You've got to show concern for everyone else, for you're not the only one."  
 And she said, "Flowers are red, young man; green leaves are green.  
 There's no need to see flowers any other way than the way they always have been seen."  
 But the little boy said, "There are so many colors in the rainbow,  
 So many colors in the morning sun, so many colors in the flower and I see every one."  
 Well, the teacher said, "You're sassy; There's ways that things should be  
 And you'll paint flowers the way they are so repeat after me."  
 And she said, "Flowers are red, young man; green leaves are green.  
 There's no need to see flowers any other way than the way they always have been seen."  
 But the little boy said, "There are so many colors in the rainbow,  
 So many colors in the morning sun, so many colors in the flower and I see every one."  
 The teacher put him in a corner. She said, "It's for your own good.  
 And you won't come out 'til you get it right, and responding like you should."  
 Well, finally he got lonely; frightened thoughts filled his head  
 And he went up to the teacher, and this is what he said:  
 "Flowers are red; green leaves are green. There's no need to see flowers any other way  
 Than the way they always have been seen."  
 Time went by like it always does, and they moved to another town  
 And the little boy went to another school, and this is what he found:  
 The teacher there was smilin'. She said, "Painting should be fun,  
 And there are so many colors in a flower so let's use every one."  
 But that little boy painted flowers in neat rows of green and red  
 And when the teacher asked him why, this is what he said,  
 "Flowers are red; green leaves are green. There's no need to see flowers any other way  
 Than the way they always have been seen."*

Is that what we sometimes do? Discourage ourselves and each other from using all the colors in the Crayola box? Do we live a life of faith in grayscale? Well...do we accept a sanctuary not even half full on Sundays for worship? *Flowers are red*. Is there nothing new left to experience about faith and God and Jesus – I've been a Christian all my life. *Green leaves are green*. Are our spirits the best they are going to be? *That's the way they have always been seen*. Can God still surprise us? Duh, yes! But, the faith changing question for us is can we surprise God? Can our faith break out of the same old, same old and surprise God?

It could...if we would. As we look towards summer, why don't we break out the big box of crayons and start a war on poverty? For example, if you don't find much use in coming to regular worship, could you commit to it for the summer – just to see? If prayer is something you cannot make yourself do – except in times of crisis – could you change that, just for the summer? Could you find the color of courage and go out to lunch with someone from church you don't know well? Could you find the color of knowledge and attend a Bible study? Could you break out the colors of fellowship and come to a picnic? Could you pull an unused crayon out of your

box and add a new color to your faith? Could we, as the people of God, devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers?

As your minister, I'd love to see what a full-color picture of discipleship would look like in this congregation. I think we'd be blown away by the wonders and signs. I think we would raise awesome disciples. I think it might even give crotchety John Rosemond a glad and generous heart.