

Today's worship and sermon continue the focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we focus on the second and closing paragraph of our statement of identity:

We are an imperfect people in an imperfect world. *We have come together, not in absolute knowledge or possession of truth, but as pilgrims assisting one another in the journey toward the promise of God. "We see in a mirror, dimly," and "know only in part" (1 Cor. 13: 12). Because we have not yet arrived, we are a work in progress. We live toward the promise of God: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jeremiah 31:33)*

John Shelby Spong, retired Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese in Newark, New Jersey, prefaces his 1998 best selling book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, with a litany of the controversies surrounding his ministry. He moves then to make a solemn observation about the church:

Institutional Christianity seems fearful of inquiry, fearful of freedom, fearful of knowledge—indeed, fearful of anything except its own repetitious propaganda, which has its origins in a world that none of us any longer inhabits. The Church historically has been willing to criticize, marginalize, or even expel its most creative thinkers. . . . This institution seems far more eager to expend its energy defending its limited truth than to see its holy words for what they are—mere pointers toward the reality that limited words always distort and never finally capture [pp. 4-5].

It is time, the bishop insists, for the church to lighten up and not merely permit but welcome the churning questions afoot in today's world. "The hunger for God," he contends, "is deep and pervasive;" but that hunger will not and cannot be met by insisting that those raising the questions merely swallow the answers hammered out centuries ago under very different conditions. The time has come for the church to welcome its people on a "frightening journey into the mystery of God" [20-21].

Fear within the confines of religious expression is nothing new. Even a minimal acquaintance with the Gospels underscores its reality in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus, Barbara Brown Taylor observes, has a relatively easy time with sinners. Their hearts are already broken, so it is not hard to reach them. "But the righteous are like vaults. They are so full of their precious values and so defended against those who do not share them that even the dynamite of the Gospel has little effect" ["The Evils of Pride and Self-Righteousness," *Living Pulpit*, O-D, 2005, p. 5]. "Woe to you Pharisees," Jesus cries, "for you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God" [Lk. 11:42].

Fear of rocking the boat, fear of abandoning the tried and true can so lock people of faith in that they focus on the minuscule. Straining at gnats and swallowing camels, they turn the body of Christ into warring camps, each contending for its own way.

Speaking to the issue of defensive religion, Fred Craddock recalls an encounter with a woman at the grocery store. "Could you tell me where I can find the peanut butter?" he asked her.

The woman whirled around, looked at him, and responded, "Are you trying to hit on me?"

"Lady, I'm just looking for the peanut butter," he told her.

Later, when he found the peanut butter on aisle five, there she was. "Oh," she said, "you were looking for the peanut butter."

"I *told* you I was looking for the peanut butter."

"Nowadays," she said, "you can't be too careful."

"Yes, you can," Craddock responded [*Cherry Log Sermons*, 50].

In the name of defending truth, even precious, timeless truth, the church and its individual protectors have far too often gone on the offensive, inflicting grievous wounds upon its own and convincing the world it has no healing word to offer.

We are called to a more excellent way. Writing to warring factions in the Corinthian church, Paul challenges the party spirit where each gathers around its preferred leader, its favorite gift, its own prized interpretation of truth. Brothers and sisters in the faith have become enemies to be defeated. The battle for domination and control is on and the spirit of Christ has been thrown out the window.

No matter, Paul says, if you have a direct line to God and understand all mysteries, no matter if you have the gift of speech and can sway millions, no matter if you are acclaimed far and wide as nothing short of a miracle worker, if you are not grounded in love, transformed by love and moved by love, it's just an empty show.

Far from a romanticized, sentimental feeling, the love to which Paul points is identifiable by specific

characteristics and actions. In keeping with the El Greco painting of the sixteenth century depicting faith, hope and love, love is distinguished by her children. Look to the model of the one who called you out of darkness into light, Paul counsels. Be patient and kind—attributes he elsewhere directly attributes to God [Romans 2:4]. As if recalling each of the points at which he has chided the Corinthian church, he dissociates them one by one from the nature and actions of love. Love, he insists, is not envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, demanding of its own way, irritable, resentful or quick to accuse.

Moved by love, we recognize ourselves as recipients of grace far exceeding our own merit. Moved by love, we extend the grace we have received to others and build a community of grace.

We journey toward the promise of God. Weary of the conflict that can so dominate the body of Christ that it obliterates every semblance of love, attuned to the uncertainties and questions that dog our own faith, and convinced that a healthy body of Christ can and should grapple with honest questions rather than repel them, four-and-a-half years ago we gathered this new body of Christ. Moved by our shared conviction that we had encountered the grace of God in the face of Jesus Christ, we openly acknowledged our profound awareness that we had only just begun to plumb the depths of all that could mean. In framing our Grace Covenant, we incorporated Paul's words to speak of the unfinished nature of our understanding, confessing that "we see in a mirror, dimly" and "know only in part." We committed ourselves individually and as a congregation to creating here a safe place for questions, a respect for diversity and a commitment to assist one another in the journey toward the promise of God.

We are, in the final analysis, pilgrims on a journey. We have not yet fully arrived. We have no grounds for condemning our brothers and sisters and no right to act as if we ourselves are God. We do, however, acknowledge our need for one another and our need and the world's need for this little body of Christ to be true to its calling. It is easy to find fault with the church, and we must admit there is much with which to find fault. It is, however, much harder to build a church; and it may just be that this little church is for many of us our last best effort to be a part of a body of Christ so deeply committed to living out its calling that it reinvests all of us with renewed hope. True, we have not yet arrived, but we are on the way, seeking to be shaped in everything we are and do by the gracious God who bids us into the future.

Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.