

## ACCEPTANCE - THE BINDING FACTOR

King City United Church

York United Ministries

Sunday, June 4, 2023

This morning you and I are doing something countercultural. We are attending church and worshipping God. Moreover, we do this culturally subversive activity every week. Every week we gather as a community to worship God. Did that ever occur to you that it was countercultural?

Attending church seems like such a normal activity for us, but in our society today it actually isn't normal. Most people are not attending Church. It's no longer part of our culture for the majority.

There was a time, of course, when the majority of Christian people in Canada worshipped on Sunday morning. But ever since 1946 that percentage has been dropping and continues to drop still. We, you and I, are members of a minority. What we do is countercultural. More and more our values and morals are counter to what the dominant cultural believes and practises.

What is most important, though, is not just that we come here Sunday after Sunday to worship, to sing and pray, to listen, to meditate and to respond, but that we come to be a part of a community, a family.

But what keeps us here really? Why do we return? What binds us to one another? Why don't we just remain strangers like movie goers who sit close to one another but never meet? They experience the same event but seldom experience each other. What makes us different? What binds us to one another?

I am tempted to say that the binding factor is love, God's love for us revealed in Christ and our love for one another which is inspired and enabled by God's love. But I want to be more concrete and specific than that. Love is a kind of intangible and abstract word. And it's one of those words which has become so

common that in many ways it has lost its meaning, like the words great and nice. It's a word too often misunderstood as emotion rather than as action. So, I would offer instead the word, acceptance. Acceptance is the binding factor, God's acceptance of us in and through Christ and our acceptance of one another. Acceptance is not merely a feeling. It is active, not passive. If we accept someone then we cannot live indifferently or apathetically towards that person because acceptance implies doing something. It is the dynamic of acceptance which binds us together as a family, as brothers and sisters.

Acceptance begins with God, with the dynamic of God's acceptance of us.

It has been noted about the people of Israel that it is really quite incredible that a little band of refugees, of slaves emancipated from bondage in Egypt, wandering about in the desert, was to change the course of human history. But from the Bible's perspective the reason is simple. It was God who formed a people from these refugees by making a covenant with them. God accepted them; God took the initiative to choose them to be God's people. At Mount Sinai through Moses God gave them the great gift of the Ten Commandments and the Law which showed them how to live as God's own free people. The Law helped them to keep the covenant with God. Their keeping of the Law signified that they were a different and separate people. They were God's people. God accepted them and they in turn accepted God. It was this dynamic of mutual acceptance which bound the people together and enabled them to change the course of human history.

When I say it is a dynamic, I mean that it was never an accomplished fact, but that acceptance is an ongoing, living relationship. Although God's love and caring were constant and unwavering, Israel's acceptance was wavering constantly. Israel didn't always follow in God's way. They wandered but God constantly called them and welcomed them home, and this dynamic of acceptance bound them to God as the people of God.

This too is the dynamic which binds us to God, God's acceptance of us as the Church, the Body of Christ.

This acceptance by God of the community then overflows into the lives of its individual members. Its members feel accepted by the family and so by God. From God's acceptance of the corporate body, we as individuals find acceptance ourselves. From its wholeness we can become whole. From its healing we can be healed.

Many years ago, in the *Today* magazine, which was a supplement to the *Toronto Star*, there was a series of photographs of Inuit life taken in 1950 by Richard Harrington. One of them was a portrait of a pleasant looking, serene woman. Her story, however, was tragic and yet a testimony to the power of acceptance by her community.

The woman and her husband and two children went hunting for the winter far away from their home. One day early on her husband did not return. He was probably killed. She was left with two children, no food and a long winter approaching. In a couple of weeks, the children died from starvation. Eventually she ate their bodies in order to survive. In the spring the people of her village found her barely alive and mentally deranged. But they took her home and cared for her, and in the security of her home, in the fellowship of her people, she recovered, remarried, and had another child. That is the power of acceptance by one's family, by one's people, the power to resurrect the human spirit and indeed a human life with love and acceptance rather than with judgment and rejection.

Isn't that the power we have all felt too within the fellowship of the Church? Certainly, we haven't suffered a tragedy as great as this Inuit woman experienced, but often we have probably felt like her, guilt ridden, disgraced, dirty, unacceptable. And then we have felt the warmth, the compassion, the caring, the acceptance of that family, of those family members, who incarnate the acceptance and forgiveness of God. So overwhelming is that feeling sometimes that it's hard to believe. It's hard to accept ourselves. Yet this overpowering acceptance empowers us to accept those around who in our limited vision might appear unacceptable to us.

The American preacher and teacher of preachers Fred

Craddock tells the story of the time he and his wife stopped at a restaurant and entered into a conversation with the proprietor who was circulating about the tables greeting the patrons. Learning that Craddock was a minister he told him his story. He had been born only a few miles from there. His mother was not married and in those days that was a disgrace. His mother was criticized, and his schoolmates learned from their parents to ridicule him. He learned to stay by himself at lunch and recess. Trips to town were met with stares and shaking heads and he heard the question, "I wonder who his father is?"

When the boy was 12 a new pastor came to town. He was noted for his skill at preaching. The boy was fascinated and so he would sneak in late, listen to the sermon and leave early so no one would catch him and ask, "What's a boy like that doing here?"

One day he got so caught up in the service that he didn't leave. Suddenly he felt a big hand on his shoulder. "Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?" It was the preacher. His young heart sunk when he heard the question but then the preacher went on, "Wait a minute. I know who you are. The family resemblance is unmistakable. You are a child of God! Boy, that's quite an inheritance. Go and claim it."

"That one statement literally changed my whole life," the man said. He grew up to have a successful and respected life. His name was Ben Hooper and twice he was elected governor of Tennessee. All that because a small-town preacher recognized a child of God. He felt accepted, loved, and cherished.<sup>i</sup>

Isn't that what we all want?

In last Sunday's *New York Times* supplement to the *Toronto Star*, in a guest essay Brad Stulberg wrote about the importance of community. "Humans," he wrote, "need one another. We are stronger when enmeshed with others in community."

"Community was once built into many people's lives through organized religion. Adults would go to church, or synagogue or mosque every week, and see the same people. They would contribute in a way that made them feel good, too."

“Organized religion has been in decline, and nothing has replaced it.” Consequently, people are lonely. “Fifty-eight percent of American adults feel lonely, with a whopping 79 percent of young people reporting feeling lonely.”<sup>ii</sup>

Nobody wants to feel lonely, and when we gather consistently as an obligation with the same community of people week after week that fellowship makes us feel acceptable and accepted, loved and cared for. People need accepting relationships. They need compassion. And they need forgiveness.

There is a story about an experience so powerful that the story itself remains powerful no matter how often it is heard. It concerns Corrie Ten Boom. You may recall that the Ten Boom family sheltered Jews from the Nazis in the Netherlands during the Second World War, but they were discovered and sent to concentration camps where they all died, except Corrie.

After her liberation from the camp at the end of the war Corrie set out on her journey to forgive those who had wronged her. She even forgave the Nazis who dehumanized her life in the camps.

She believed that in forgiveness was the only power capable of healing the history of hurt and hate for the people of Europe. She preached about the possibility and power of forgiveness in Holland, then in France and then in Germany. In Munich one Sunday, she preached it to all those German people who were eager to be forgiven.

After the service a man walked up to her, reached out his hand to her and said, "I'm so glad that Jesus forgives us all of our sin, just as you say."

The man before her was one of the guards at the camp in which she was interred. She remembered how he leered at the women taking showers, how he mocked them, how he abused them. He reached out his hand to her and her hand froze at her side.

She could not forgive. She was stunned and terrified at her weakness. Deep hurt and desperate hate overwhelmed her. She

was confronted by a man she could not forgive. What could she do?

She prayed, "Jesus, I can't forgive this man. Forgive me." At once, in some wonderful way for which she was not prepared, she felt forgiven.

And at that moment she was freed of her hate and hurt, and her hand went out. She took the hand of her enemy and released him from his sin and guilt and his past. And in his release, she freed herself.<sup>iii</sup>

People, all people, need acceptance. They need forgiveness. They need to be freed from their past and their sins and released into the present. And this acceptance is what we have in the Church, what you have here. We who were refugees were accepted as the people of God. We who had uncountable sin and guilt were released by the limitless love and acceptance of God expressed in Christ. This is what binds us to God and to one another. This is what keeps us here. This is why we return. In this family of God is acceptance, the acceptance of God, the acceptance of others. This is what we offer the world. And with this gift of God, we can change world history. So may it be for you and me. So may it be. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> Retold from Fred Craddock, "You Are A Child of God." quoted in *Preaching*, March/April, 1995.

<sup>ii</sup> Brad Stulberg, "For People to Really Know Us, We Need to Show Up", *The New York Times International Weekly*, May 27-28, 2023, p. 14.

<sup>iii</sup> See Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place: The Triumphant True Story of Corrie Ten Boom*, Random House Publishing Group, 1984.