

***Oak Meadow
United Methodist Church***

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Laity Notes

by
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SERMON-IN-SONG

On this past Friday evening some twenty of us gathered in the parking lot and from there made our way to Temple Bethel for Shabbat services. Shabbat is the Jewish Sabbath, which begins at sundown Friday and ends at sundown Saturday. The original Temple Bethel congregation extends back to 1874. During recent years the congregation had to make a decision about whether to handle growth by renovation and expansion or to move into the suburbs. They decided to stay in the same place and to invest between \$5 and \$6 million making the temple bigger and better. We were given a brief tour of the temple prior to the eight o'clock service, and were able to see the splendid results of community effort. We learned that Temple Bethel has about 1200 family units and San Antonio about 10,000 Jews. Temple Bethel is a Reform Judaism Temple. San Antonio also has a Conservative and Orthodox Jewish Temple, the latter just around the corner from Oak Meadow UMC.

During the main Shabbat service we were treated to a "Sermon-in-Song" by choir members from four institutions: Christ Episcopal Church, First Presbyterian Church, Trinity Baptist Church and Temple Bethel. Combined voices of some hundred singers sang a lengthy medley crafted around the voice of the Temple's *hazzan*, or cantor. Their performance was first class and moving, and we reaped the harvest of months of diligent preparation.

At Temple Bethel we witnessed the familiar and the unusual. Familiar were the words above the bema (sanctuary), "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Unusual was the sound of Hebrew, spoken and sung often by the congregation at large and recited from the pulpit by a 13-year-old girl celebrating her Bat Mitzvah. There is something quite impressive about a confirmation requiring two years of preparation and the Hebrew language. Familiar were the many signs and symbols of the Old Testament. Unfamiliar was the recitation of the name of every congregant member who had died throughout the years during the period marked out by the past week.

Last fall our pastor attended a class along with the *hazzan* of Temple Bethel. One of the fruits of that joint study was our invitation to Temple Bethel to witness a Sermon-in-Songs. We are grateful to both for that invitation.

CELL TELEPHONES AND EFFICIENCY

It was but a few years ago that a cell or mobile telephone was a rare site and sound. Today they are everywhere. Literally everywhere. Last week in the Harlington airport I heard the voice of someone talking on a cell telephone while they were hidden sight by the closed doors of a toilet stall! The cell telephone knows no boundaries, and what recently was rare has today become ubiquitous.

In some respects this is to be applauded. Cell telephones have definitely improved efficiency. We can be "on the job" from any location. Travel by car or airplane no longer means hours of being away from work. Cell telephones have in some respects also added to our sense of security. At any moment we can check another's safety or report a problem. We can easily keep track of and be kept trace of, and that might in fact make us more efficient.

But the coin has two sides. A cell telephone ought to come with a book on etiquette attached. For some, the excitement of being close to someone physically distant has led them to sacrifice the person at their side. If ever we need to be reminded of the commandment to "Love thy neighbor as thyself" it is today when we are about to make or receive a call on our mobile. For most of history, a neighbor was someone located close by. If you spoke to someone about your neighbor, an assumption was made that

they were close, perhaps within walking distance. And for a long time walking distance was a length considered much longer than today. What we have created today is a way to make those distant near at a moments notice. What we have not yet created is a way to make those near suddenly disappear. If I am standing next to someone in an airport, at a bookstore or at a urinal, my ringing telephone does not make them suddenly disappear. My response to my ringing telephone, if I am not careful, can give them the impression that they have just disappeared. Here we get to the manners part. Proximity ought to prompt consideration, ringing telephone or not.

For years I have had trouble with the conceptual differentiation between the phrases “in this world” and “of this world.” I am thankful for the cell telephone for having finally made this theology clear enough for me to grasp. Being “in this world” means that you mind your manners toward those near you if your telephone rings, or if you feel the urge to make a telephone call. Being “of this world” means that your telephone rules you and you bellow over your telephone as those next to you mattered not one whit.

There is something for us at Oak Meadow UMC in all this. We need a certain amount of efficiency. A kite cannot fly without someone holding the string. We need theology and doctrine. We need a space and a time for worship. We need a sense of order. But we also need something else. We need community. And at that lower realm, where we bump elbow to elbow, community trumps efficiency. In this realm the feeling of belonging and being useful is more important than efficient.

THE CALENDAR

During the days leading to Christmas, a colleague at work told me a story about her first grade son who attends public school in San Antonio. While they were out shopping for Christmas gifts one Saturday afternoon, my colleague’s son corrected his mother’s reference to “Christmas vacation” by telling her, “No, Mom, it is winter vacation, not Christmas vacation.”

Over a period of centuries the Christian ecclesiastical calendar was organized around two major cycles of moveable and immoveable feasts. Christmas was the principal immovable

feast. Once Christmas was set as December 25, Advent and Epiphany, two important moveable feasts, became Sundays reckoned from Christmas. Easter was the principal moveable feast, and the dates of most other moveable feasts were determined with respect to Easter. The liturgical year had a narrative shape that was drawn particularly from the gospels. Through ritual the liturgical year imprinted the biblical narrative on human minds by setting the rhythm of communal life. That rhythm was composed of seasons and made eminently public.

The emperor Constantine made Sunday a public holiday in 321, and thereby took the initial step of transforming the Christian calendar into a civic calendar. Only later was Christmas placed on the Roman calendar. Three more centuries passed before a Scythian monk, Dionysius Exiguus, became the first person to transform Christianity into a marker of historical time by beginning to date events not around the lives of Roman emperors but “from the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ,” i.e. *Anno Domini*, A.D. Another century passed before his scheme was adopted by a Synod in England and used by the historian Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. From the 7th century B.C. and A.D. became standard methods of dating historical time.

“Tis the season to be jolly” told people for centuries that Christmas was around the corner. At the same time it put them on notice about Advent and Epiphany. A new season was on the way. These seasons became predictable reminders that the Church lives by another time. They became yet another way of marking a difference between being “in the world” and “of the world.”

All this simply did not happen. It took the effort of a multitude of people working over a period centuries to put it in place. How long will it take to cast it aside? I wonder if the teacher who taught my colleague’s son that Christmas vacation had turned into winter vacation had in their mind the remotest idea about the time and effort that had gone into creating the Christmas season as an integral part of our lives?

COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

Please email comments or suggestions to cjhall_45@yahoo.com or leave a telephone message at 404-1894.