

**Oak Meadow
United Methodist Church**

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Laity Notes

by
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CHURCH CONFERENCE

After worship service and a good meal, our annual church conference was held on November 30. Various reports were offered and new officers for our church committees were confirmed. We have seven committees for the coming year: Administrative Council, Pastor/Parish Relations, Board of Trustees, Finance, Lay Leadership (Nominations), Membership/Ministry/Evangelism, and Worship. The nominating committee met in September and recommended combining the Membership/Ministry Committee and the Evangelism Committee into one Membership/Ministry/Evangelism Committee. Their primary task is twofold: (1) to keep current members and (2) to add new members. The Administrative Council is the highest body of our church and is responsible for overall administration. The Pastor/Parish Relations Committee works with the pastor to define goals for the church. The Board of Trustees keeps track of our physical plant, and the Finance Committee keeps track of our money. The Lay Leadership Committee (or Nominations Committee) nominates congregation members to the various committees, while the Worship Committee looks after our Sunday morning worship service.

Committees virtually did not meet in 2002, but some began to become active once again in February 2003. We need full participation and activity in 2004. Our church doesn't run itself,

and it doesn't run any better than the collective effort we put into running it. We have no autopilot at Oak Meadow UMC. We have a Pastor, but no staff. This is the nature of a small church, not a matter about which to complain. My own experience this past year suggests that our church operates best when the demand "I want," is closely followed by the concession "I will." The greater the distance between "I want" and "I will," the more likely we are to fall into a deep sleep, waiting for someone to bring or produce what "we want." Plainly translated, "full participation and activity" means that we more often hear "I will" than "I want."

WEEKLY OFFERING

Some years ago I heard a sermon at First Presbyterian Church by Louis Zbinden in which he suggested that church members give their offerings each Sunday rather than on a monthly or annual basis. I was reminded of this a few Sundays ago while sitting next to two guests while the offering plate was being passed around. Having slipped into the habit of making my offering at the first of the month, I waved the plate by as it was passed down the row in which I sat. Along the way, the plate passed before our two guests. This moment reminded me of Louis Zbinden's sermon and set me to thinking. Beginning last week, I resolved to give my offering on a weekly basis for the coming year. The primary reason is personal. By giving on a monthly basis, it becomes difficult for me to separate my church offering from my house payment, my water and sewer bill, my electric bill and my telephone bill. In a very real sense, the monthly method has a way of turning my church offering into simply another bill to be paid rather than an offering to God. The two are quite distinct and are best kept separate.

The first offering (*minchah*) in the Bible was the spontaneous act by Cain when he "brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground." [Genesis 4:3] Abel followed suit and "also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions." "And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard." Commentators have spilt a good deal of ink in their attempts to understand God's reaction to these initial offerings, and they have yet to reach agreement. Be that as it may, God was pretty clear about offerings in the book of Exodus where, at the end of the Book of the Covenant, he told Moses on

Mount Sinai that “None shall appear before me empty-handed.” [Exodus 23:15]

I guess that I sort of felt “empty-handed” on that recent Sunday morning as the plate passed by our guests and myself. As many times as I reminded myself that I had fulfilled my monthly pledge, I still could not get around that “empty-handed” feeling. Each time I attempted to argue myself out of this mess, my mind returned to the verb “remember,” which is quite prominent in the Book of Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Bible. Our offering is not simply a bill to be paid or a pledge to be kept. Our offering is a way of thanking God for the gifts he has given us which have enabled us to earn and to give a portion of our earning, and our means of honoring His command that we not appear before Him “empty-handed.” Our offering is also a way of reminding ourselves of this combination. I for one am better at remembering what I am doing and why I am doing it when I make my offering each week to remind myself. By making my offering each Sunday I am better able to separate it from other checks I write. I offer my apology to Louis Zbinden for it taking so long for his sermon finally to hit home.

KINDNESS AND THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

I am a great fan of Kathleen Norris. She spent seven years in New York City working with poets after her graduation from Bennington College in the 1960s. She spent twenty years of her adult life in the wilderness before turning back to the church. She found God somewhere on the plains of western South Dakota among jackrabbits and coyotes.

In *The Virgin of Bennington* she writes of her years in New York City among artists. One night at a party with the Andy Warhol crowd, with a strong scent of Columbian marijuana in the air, she began to get serious about her life. Looking back years later, she does not castigate the people at that party, but rather is reminded of what a contemporary of Jesus, Philo of Alexandria, wrote long ago: “...be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” (96)

Those words are most apt for the coming Christmas season with its flood of great emotions. This is the time of year when we seem to vacillate between loving someone

deeply one moment, and wanting only a moment later to wring their neck. Along with the birth of Jesus, Christmas is the season of deadlines, parties, and gifts to purchase, wrap and deliver. It is the season of high expectations and long memories. Some of those memories bring broad smiles to our faces, while others cast a deep shadow. In short, Christmas is, among other things, a season of great battles.

Much will be written about how best to deal with these battles. Such advice flows freely at this time of the year, although some of it will be far from free. Philo of Alexandria might not be the panacea for every ill this season, but the price of what he wrote is right and the direction in which he points us is helpful.

“Be kind,” he suggests, not simply for the sake of kindness, but because everyone we meet is fighting a great battle. We are not the only ones fighting the battles of Christmas season. Look outward and every person you see will be fighting battles as big as yours. Their patience will be as thin as yours. Their tears will be as close to the surface as yours. Their anger and frustration will be as great as yours. And who knows, by looking outward toward others and being careful and kind towards them, we might just find helpful ammunition for our own inner battles.

For these reasons be kind. For these reasons be present. Two of the greatest healing balms we possess are kindness and our presence. These thoughts might be helpful when we are tempted to bark at the person next to us in a shopping line, or when we want to sleep in late on Sunday morning. That person standing next to you in the shopping line is inwardly fighting a great battle. With them a small kindness might be just what the doctor ordered to help them through their battle. Each Sunday morning someone in church draws strength from seeing your presence. They might never say anything to you, and you might never know it, but rest assured that not a Sunday goes by without someone looking forward to seeing just you at worship service. Each of us is a teacher. We cannot help being teachers simply by living our lives. What do we want to teach?

COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

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