

Household Ethic

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ on Sept. 21, 2008

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Romans 14

Cultivating Good Relationships

1 Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with—even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.

2-4 For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume he should only be a vegetarian and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other ate or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.

19-21 So let's agree to use all our energy in getting along with each other. Help others with encouraging words; don't drag them down by finding fault. You're certainly not going to permit an argument over what is served or not served at supper to wreck God's work among you, are you? I said it before and I'll say it again: All food is good, but it can turn bad if you use it badly, if you use it to trip others up and send them sprawling. When you sit down to a meal, your primary concern should not be to feed your own face but to share the life of Jesus. So be sensitive and courteous to the others who are eating. Don't eat or say or do things that might interfere with the free exchange of love.

Over the past couple of weeks we have been tossing around the idea of household. For Kick Off Sunday we thought about the Shadow Rock household remembered, restored, and renewed. We wanted to celebrate and honor the past especially when we think about the blood, sweat, and tears that went into giving us a foundation for the future. Shadow Rock household remembered and honored.

When we think about our household being restored and renewed we made some subtle but important distinctions between restoration and renewal. The most important distinction is how emphasis of one over the other puts us in a definite relationship to history; facing backward or facing forward. Shadow Rock household restored; facing backward. Shadow Rock household renewed; facing forward.

Last week I wanted to go further with our household imagery. I believe that the household image works because it is a concept that allows us to explore the politics of our life together. Politics is simply the management of human affairs and how we order the activity, rules, and boundaries of our household is the intersection of faith, politics, and economics. I believe this is true whether we are talking about our homes, our congregation, our country club, our places of employment or our nation. There are politics in each of these settings. Which ever way we decide to stand in relationship to history, we will stand together and our communal life unfolds. But how will we stand together? Will we do the politics of our life together well or poorly? To help us answer this question I encouraged us to explore the story of Jesus and the children as told by the storyteller, Matthew.

The story of Jesus and the little children is a story about how we will be in relationship with each other. When it comes to power there are two kinds of people; those who hoard power and those who give it away. Jesus is promoting a communal life that is characterized by the sharing of power. If power is the capacity to produce change than the greatest positive change comes when people are giving away their power for the sake of empowering the other. This is a dynamic that happens between individuals, groups and even nations and the Christian faith is the story that confirms this power ethic in the story of God's relationship to Creation. God gives away God's power in order to renew and heal the world.

This leaves us with a very distinct and concrete household ethic. Some people think it would be nice to have such a clear cut ethic as ten rules or commandments and yet, by not having rules written in stone we can better avoid the death of legalism. Instead of a list of rules we are given a Spirit and several examples. Before we look at the idea of being given a Spirit and some examples let me point out an important theological point.

One of the foundational and ongoing discussions in theology is the discussion of freedom vs. determinism. [*This argument has never really been resolved and more wood is thrown on the fire as we consider the role of technology in our lives and as the biological sciences reveal more information about the role of genetics.*] Ordering our life together by the Spirit rather than a list of rules is risky business. At the core of this kind of ethic is respect and freedom. With our freewill we can do great harm to each other or we can do great good. One of the points of the Creation story is that our capacity for freedom is so valued by God that God takes the chance that we would abuse our freedom and abuse one another. One of the ways we can see the Judeo-Christian faith story is to see a movement of a people who like children need many rules to a more mature spiritual people who need only one rule, "Love One Another". It is like parenting. When my children were young they needed more rules. As they grew and matured they needed fewer rules and they were able to exercise more freedom.

It is in this freedom that the Spirit and people of faith find each other. The Spirit I am talking about is the freedom of the household of God.

- It is the Spirit of “thy Kingdom come and thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”.
- It is the Spirit of Jubilee which is characterized by a confidence in the God of history and the forgiveness of debt (an ancient message with contemporary relevance).
- It is the Spirit of good news to the poor.
- It is the Spirit that says fairness is right but generosity is Godly.
- It is the Spirit of inclusive love and an open table.

It is the Spirit which shaped the first century communal life of believers in such a way that while there was slavery in the world there was no slavery in their household of faith. While there was a power ethic in the world that put men in dominant roles over women and children, there was no such ethic in the household of faith. While there was an ethic of exclusion in the world there was no such ethic in the household of faith. The ethic is idealized in the notion that there is no slave or master, no male or female, no Jew or Gentile.

So, we strive to embody this same Spirit and live out this same ethic. While we are in the household of Shadow Rock there is no male or female, no gay or straight, no republican or democrat. We live in a Spirit of inclusiveness. We live in a Spirit of generosity that transcends fairness and yet we are male and female, gay and straight, republican and democrat. This is part of our freedom and our respect for each other. However, inclusion does not mean sameness.

We keep our uniqueness and distinctiveness. We are a household that exists in the edgy spiritual paradox of the here and now and the not yet but coming. Our household ethic is to live in the tension of this reality. Our household ethic is to live in this Spirit and the way we order our household will produce living examples which will inspire and invite the world to life’s greatest possibilities.

So, what are the examples of such an ethic? We see this in the work of our ministry teams and our relational groups. Watch the interaction of people in Children’s Ed, Adult Ed, Living Our Faith, Choir, Keystones, Older Boulders, Rainbow Rocks, Youth, and all the others. We encourage this in our staff by not emphasizing our own rights and welfare but rather emphasizing the rights and welfare of the other. The love and joy we share and show each other are examples of the eternal Spirit at work in the world. However, it is not just a self-serving household. It begins with our experiences with each other but we only stand in the flow of the Spirit. It flows to us and through us out to the larger households in the world. This is our joy. This is our calling. This is our ethic.

Just as the life and ministry of Jesus challenged the political and religious households of his day so the way we are with each other will challenge the self serving people and institutions of our day. As the church we do not exist in order to rubber stamp approve the unjust acts of the powerful. As the church we do not exist to give a religious justification for the status quo. We exist as a counter cultural force of the eternal Spirit which confronts evil, challenges apathy and cynicism, and promotes the healing of brokenness. Our teams and relational groups are doing this and they strive to do more. And our time of worship and preaching is a time to address the issues that dominate the news within the framework of faith and the living God who shapes history.

In this Spirit I have questions. There will be many individuals who will walk away from our current financial crisis with millions of dollars. What is the household ethic that perpetuated this crisis? It is as old as all ancient and eternal wisdom. It is a household ethic of greed. The majority of people will bear the burden of their success through taxes and the cuts of assistance programs. How many lives could we lift up if the resources dedicated to the war in Iraq and financial institution bailouts had actually gone to education, health care, energy independence, and infrastructure renewal? I will not pretend to understand the complex economic crisis we are experiencing but I will share with you one notion. I remember in the 1980's the unkind political rhetoric about welfare recipients. The poor were told they needed to step up and pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. They needed to take responsibility and not look for a government handout and the American people have been influenced by this cruel rhetoric for almost a quarter of a century. Why doesn't this logic apply to the banks? We are told it does not apply to the banks because their mistakes are too big with consequences too devastating and too far reaching. We are told that we must bail out Wall Street in order to preserve Main Street. I hear it and believe it but I do not like it and I wonder about the justice of it. As a nation we need a better household ethic. Even if I allow that point to be true I sure hope that people will be kinder when they think about the struggle of the poor who receive a lot less help. Let us remember to subsidize the poor as well as the rich.

The predominant characteristic of our household is the old fashion traditional eternal agape love. This means that no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey you are welcomed here. This means we that no matter what a person is like, God seeks nothing but that person's highest good and we are willing to let God use us to make such love known. We have tremendous freedom but we can build a household based on the ethic that I willingly put constraints on my freedom for the sake of my love for you. Think what kind of household we would have with such an ethic in effect. Our life together, the Shadow Rock household ethic, will be characterized by unconquerable benevolence, invincible goodwill, and an ever expanding circle of inclusive love, creative justice, and self sacrificing power.