

A Good Place To Be In 'Tea Party' Times

1 John 4:7-21 (Sunday, April 18, 2010)

This is a stewardship sermon. That means we are kicking off our annual Every Member Canvass drive. You will receive a pledge letter this week asking you to make a financial commitment to the church in the fiscal year beginning July 1. Today, after church in the Parish Hall, members of the Finance Committee will present a proposed budget for that new fiscal year. I hope you will listen in! Everyone has a part in this enterprise which we call South Church. You heard Cathy Rossi speak thoughtfully and movingly a few moments ago about what this church means to her. I especially thank her because it isn't easy to do what she did, to speak of things we don't often put to words, and to do so here publicly in worship. And now it's my turn. It's not that I wish to speak of money. The Finance Committee will do that later in Coffee Hour. I do wish to speak of value, and what this church means in what I am calling 'Tea Party' Times.

When I speak of 'Tea Party Times,' I mean a spirit of anger and fear winging its way across America. The 'Tea Party' *itself* makes for dramatic headlines on the evening news, but if you listen carefully behind all the bombast and the crowd-pleasing antics of some politicians, I'm not sure that the "powers that be" take the Tea Party all that seriously as a political threat. Perhaps you noticed that while former Governor Sarah Palin spoke to Tea Party activists in Boston last week, Republican Senator Scott Brown was making sure everyone noticed he down in Washington, DC, four hundred miles away, doing the people's work. Tea Party folk seem to be boisterous, angry about government and taxes, resentful of President Obama, furious about illegal immigration, unhappy about health care for all, and uneasy with a changing society including women and minorities on the Supreme Court. Did I miss anything? Probably. What is much more difficult to discern is what the Tea Party is *for*. I did hear that the Tea Party in Florida is in favor of the NASA space program. But so is President Obama. It must be confusing for everyone.

I have no interest in analyzing the Tea Party movement. I *am* concerned about the spirit of anxiety and rage that it gives voice to. I cannot remember when I have heard such moaning and groaning, such vituperative name calling, such factless and baseless accusation, such mindless bullying, such silly and pointless prevarication. It's not the Tea Party – they are

simply one voice in the mix. It's all over the Web, it's in the newspapers, it's part and parcel of news programming, it's texted, tweeted, blogged and twittered. And it's around here, too, the same mindless, stupid stuff, just this side of violence. Periodically somebody tries to cut or burn the Rainbow flag down from the front of South Church. Recently there's been some minor vandalism on the church secretary's desk. I don't know who. Doesn't matter. It's the spirit of the times.

So I turn to the text this morning and I hear these words: *God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us.* And then the text continues: *There is no room in love for fear.* Thank you, Jesus! I need to be reminded from time to time that for all the business of being church – worship and fellowship and marrying and burying and growing and learning – the real work – the big work – addressing the spirit of the times. Saying, *No, not here! Here we listen to Jesus' voice. We remember that on the night before he died he commanded us: Love one another as I have loved you!*

I take it from Jesus that the work of love is not a suggestion. He *commanded* us to love one another! I take it also that this is not a trick. Love is powerful! Love has the power to heal, to forgive, to overcome fear of any kind, to make new, to raise up what others have broken down.

Henri Nouwen, the priest and spiritual writer once said that there are two houses to be lived in. One is a house of fear. The other is a house of love. We cannot live in both places, he said. We must choose. We cannot love just some people. We cannot love others if we do not love ourselves. We cannot love God without loving our neighbor. Love is indivisible. It is our root number. It is our root cause. It is our destiny. Love is the Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our ending.

I name this South Church, then, a house of love. That means we are here and we haven't run away from one another. It means that we don't look or sound alike – we don't even like the same music! – but we don't get *the look* at each other. You know *the look*? The lips are saying one thing, but *the look* says another? *The look* is checking you out. *The look* has the nose a scant degree up in the air. *The look* says, *Do you belong here?* No, we don't do *the look* here at South Church – not anymore, not for a long time.

The other day I was at a meeting with clergy and I heard our name – South Church – being mentioned. The person was describing the variety of churches that can be found in the United Church of Christ. At the one end of the spectrum he mentioned a particular church in the suburbs, very nice, very pretty, very uni-racial , very uncomfortable with varieties of anything, including sexual orientation, rather conservative in its Christian theology about sin and all that. At the other end of the spectrum he mentioned South Church – as though the very mention of our name would explain everything about the other end of the spectrum. So another clergy person asked me, *So, what does it look like at South Church?* And I said, *Well, umm, you see....it's like this..... We.....ahhhh...HmMMM, you know something? You just have to come see for yourself!*

When you come into a house of love, you just know it. When you live in a house that is truly welcoming, where a God of love is heard and felt, where Jesus is spoken of as someone footloose somewhere in the house, where you are noticed for your heart and not your pocketbook, where nobody knows your title and everybody knows your name, where you come to church with an expectation that something is going to get shifted in your life on Sunday and you are going to break out on Monday with an altered attitude on things – such a place, such a community, such a church is a pretty good place to be in Tea Party times, wouldn't you say?

I do. And I say such a place is worth supporting with your love, your time and your treasure. There aren't many places like South Church. So, I ask you. When you receive your pledge letter this week, don't just set it aside or put it with the bills to be paid. Put it by your plate on the dinner table. Put it on the fireplace mantel if you have one. Put it somewhere you can see it. Ask yourself, *In times like these, what it means to be part of a house of love and not a house of fear?*

And then do what feels generous and worthy to you in the way of a financial pledge. You see, love's funny that way. Once you see it the evidence of love, you want some yourself. Once you find some, you want to share it. Once you see love going to work, you can't help yourself – you're hooked – *you start to believe in the power of love in a Tea Party world!*

Isn't that what the text says? *We love because God first loved us!* Amen

