

“You Tell Me it’s the Institutions”

A Sermon for the Members and Friends of Millburn Congregational UCC

1 Corinthians 9: 16-23

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B

Rev. Jed C. Watson

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You’ve heard the phrase “You can’t be all things to all people.” It has a pleasant ring to it. Maybe someone shared that with you at some point, as a way of bringing you some comfort. Perhaps someone noticed that you were taking on a little too much and trying to please too many people at the same time. So they said, “Joe, really, you can’t be all things to all people.” You found it comforting, therapeutic, like a great weight had been removed from your shoulders, a monkey extracted from your back. Since then you’ve reminded yourself of those words when it’s been clear that, once again, you’ve taken on too much or tried to please too many people, or were heading in that direction. “Joanne, really, you can’t be all things to all people.”

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But you walked in here this morning and got your bubble burst. And you got your bubble burst in the worst possible way, by hearing exactly the opposite sentiment in the Holy Scriptures, which speak with disarming Authority. The words are clear, unambiguous, and inescapable. Paul writes to the church that he founded at Corinth, “I have become all things to all people.” And you know that he thinks that’s a good thing, and that he’s holding himself up as a model; he’s saying that being willing to become all things to all people is the way to be.

He says, “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak.” “I have become all things to all people...”

The most important value is the vitality and well-being of the community. Paul’s saying that he’ll do anything, absolutely anything, to bring people into this new community and to keep them there. He’ll meet everybody at their level, and not resent it. He’s saying that his loyalty and commitment to the community, the Church, trumps his freedom to be who and how he might like to be. He’s an individual, yeah, sure, and as a Christian he’s free from old laws and rules and regulations, and that’s all good. But in the end his true identity is to be found in his belonging to this larger thing, the Kingdom of God in Christ, the first fruit of which, here on Earth, is the Church.

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David Brooks had an interesting column in the New York Times a couple weeks ago. He called it, “What Life Asks of Us.” It was a kind of lament about the decline of institutions in our culture. Individualism has won out over institutions, he thinks, overwhelmingly, and in his view that’s not a good thing. He lifts up the ideas of a political philosopher named Hugh Heclo who has a new book called “On Thinking Institutionally.” Heclo thinks that people are casting out institutions like they would old things they find in the attic.

Here's the argument: "As we go through life, we travel through institutions – first family and school, then the institutions of a profession or craft." Those institutions make us who we are. They shape us, and mold us, and form us. They play critical roles in our development, and they help define our identity. And the thing about them is, they require a certain commitment and loyalty – buy-in, if you will – to remain strong and vibrant. Individuals have to defer to them, subject themselves to those institutions to some extent, or they start to crumble and fall apart.

I'm not a fan of the Chicago Cubs, not by a long shot, and I usually don't go out of my way to say nice things about them. But Hecllo writes about a guy who is near and dear to many hearts in this building, a fellow named Ryne Sandburg. (Remember him?) Hecllo quotes the speech Sandburg gave for his induction to the baseball Hall of Fame. Sandburg said, "I was in awe every time I walked onto the field. That's respect. I was taught you never, ever disrespect your opponents or your teammates or your organization or your manager and never, ever your uniform. You make a great play, act like you've done it before; get a big hit, look for the third base coach and get ready to run the bases."

During that speech Sandberg lifted up all of the players who had been inducted before him. He said, "These guys sitting up here did not pave the way for the rest of us so that players could swing for the fences every time up and forget how to move a runner over to third. It's disrespectful to them, to you and to the game of baseball that we all played growing up.

"Respect. A lot of people say this honor validates my career, but I didn't work hard for validation. I didn't play the game right because I saw a reward at the end of the tunnel. I played it right because that's what you're supposed to do, play it right and with respect If this validates anything, it's that guys who taught me the game ... did what they were supposed to do, and I did what I was supposed to do."

The thing, baseball, made him, Sandburg thinks. It wasn't the other way around. It made him who he was as a player; it made him who he is today. But the thing is, it comes with some obligations – the individual has to make some sacrifices on behalf of the institution. The individual has to give a little so the institution can go on shaping lives. Said another way, the individual is part of something greater than himself, or herself.

That's what people like Brooks and Hecllo think we're losing.

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This week I was thinking, "Why did this argument make such an impression on me? Am I just getting older? Is that what it is? I'm not sure I would always have been receptive to this way of thinking. Have I just reached the age when this kind of thing starts making sense? A while ago I heard someone my age saying, "Young people today don't know what it means to *work* – they expect everything to be handed to them on a silver platter."

I don't think it *is* age for me – not this, anyway. I know I don't agree with the bit about the young people of today not being hard workers. I've found precisely the opposite: they're more industrious and achievement-oriented than my generation was at that age, I'm sure of that; they might be the hardest-working group of youngsters the country has ever raised. They're doing *everything*; they never stop. What worries me about them is not their work ethic but rather that, with all their racing and

busy-ness, they won't find any, sort of, grounding for their lives. They won't stick with any one thing long enough to find that. They'll spend their whole lives chasing around, without the benefit of institutions to shape and form them and give them identity, and also to make claims on them.

Or am I being a fuddy-duddy even in this?

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When I think of institutions the one that comes first to mind is one Brooks didn't mention in his column, and that's the Church – the institution for which the Apostle Paul was willing to “be all things to all people.”

It's losing it in our culture, the Church. No doubt about it. This is nothing new; it's been going on since the Enlightenment of the 16th and 17th centuries; the only difference is that its rate of loss has accelerated since about the 1960's. The fastest growing religious category in our day comprises those who have no religious affiliation.

And even where people still go to church we seem to have assimilated a lot of anti-institutional values from the culture. People often look to the church to provide a service or a product that will augment the other services and products they get elsewhere. Where a church is successful it's thought to be good at providing products and services – it sells good stuff. I don't think I exaggerate.

But something's missing here. Jesus didn't send his disciples out to offer products and services. He sent them out to transform lives, and to invite people into relationship, not only with God, but also with one another. The idea was that people would belong to this new thing that was being created and taking root. And this new thing would mold people and shape their lives and give them something to be a *part of*. And, yeah: it would also require some measure of commitment and loyalty, and a sense that the individual is part of something greater than herself, or himself.

I guess I still think of the Church in that way, even if that means I'm becoming a fuddy duddy in my old age. And even though I don't like the Chicago Cubs, I can identify with Ryne Sandburg and his old-fashioned thinking about the institution of baseball, especially the sense of awe and reverence that he experienced as one who belonged to something greater than himself. It's fitting that he should give up a little bit of his freedom in the interest of the larger whole.

As someone who thinks a lot about faith and theology and things of that sort, I get all kinds of new ideas all the time, raw and undeveloped. I suppose I could exercise my freedom to come in here and unleash my latest musings on you every week – to swing for the fences every time at bat, like Sandburg says. The problem with that is I change my mind a lot. Things that I once thought were really profound and insightful I now recognize as steaming heaps of intellectual dung. Which is why a preacher's novel ideas should always be placed in the context of 2,000 years of tradition: a little bit happened before any of us arrived. Mostly our job is to move the runner over to third; it's a team sport, the Church. And it's the same way with lay folks. If the local church is doing or trying something that you as an individual don't especially like, it doesn't mean that you should boycott it until that thing fails or goes away. That's not the kind of relationship that Church entails.

Relationships like those can never shape lives, give them meaning and depth, which is what institutions like the Church are called to do. So I guess I'm joining David Brooks and Hugh Heclo in their lament over the decline of institutions even as we're trying to do something about it.

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This reminds me of a gift that the little church I used to serve received from a long-time member. It was a painting of a church building that looked a lot like the one in which we gathered, accompanied by a saying: "Everything that I have ever been, or will ever be, I owe to my family and to my church." Nice. Ah, the beauty of institutions. Amen.