

Acts 10:44-48

1 John 5:1-6

St. John 15:9-17

John 15:9-17

<sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup>I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

<sup>12</sup>"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. <sup>13</sup>No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. <sup>14</sup>You are my friends if you do what I command you. <sup>15</sup>I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. <sup>17</sup>I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

I know a story. (Stanley Hauerwas, Divinity School of Duke University)

A team of evangelical Christians invaded Shipshewana, Indiana, to bring the lost of Shipshewana to Christ. In front of Yoder's drygoods store one of the earnest souls confronted a Mennonite farmer with the familiar challenge, "Brother, are you saved?" The farmer was stunned by the question. All his years of attending the Peach Bloom Mennonite congregation had not prepared him for such a question - particularly not in front of Yoder's drygoods store.

Not wanting to offend, and believing that the person posing the question was of good will, the farmer seriously considered how he might answer. After a long pause, the farmer asked his questioner for a pencil and piece of paper - and he proceeded to write ten names. He explained that they were the names of people he believed knew him well. Most were friends. Some were less than that. Some might even be enemies.

The farmer suggested that the evangelist ask these people whether they thought him saved since he certainly would not presume to answer such a question on his own behalf.

You can't "be saved" by yourself. Some of our fellow members of the community we like. Some we do not. But, as much as we may celebrate individualism, we are called together to be one body.

In the Bible there are no stories of rugged individualists, working out their own salvation all by themselves. As we read the Scriptures, we see...you can be cursed by yourself - but you can't be saved by yourself.

If we in the church single out people from the crowd and address individuals as if they were all by themselves, then we have reduced them to something less than the way they are treated in the Bible. The biblical view of men and women is people of God.

In this morning's Gospel lesson Jesus makes us a community. He does not give us instructions for building ourselves into a community. Our life together is his choice and his doing. The words of Christ are "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." ... "You did not choose me but I chose you."

This morning we get to worship with friends and strangers we are anxious to meet, which is pleasant to do. But it is important to remember that we do not hallow all of *our* sacred exertions which have brought about the body of Christ. We are observing the work of God.

Today we read these words of Christ, "I have appointed you to go and bear fruit..." but then he qualifies it. He says, "...fruit that will last." I suspect that means it will not be enough to celebrate friendliness and undemanding hopes. Our life together is made of sterner stuff. We have gathered to hear the words of Jesus, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you."

That is what makes us one body. That is a love we can trust. Fruit that will last.

The church is made of people coming together, openly discussing the faith, encouraging one another, sharing values, and giving hope to the world. I am in favor of all people sharing their faith with each other. But it has occurred to me that being in favor of people overcoming divisions and coming together to worship God means (in my shallower moments) I am hoping we break down barriers that we put there in the first place - and then hope that God is proud of us for what we were able to achieve. So I remind myself, the body of Christ is not about what we achieve. It is about recognizing the gift of God.

The world-wide church is not a choice that Christians make. It is a declaration of how much we believe in God's choice for us.

Jesus says, "You did not choose me. I chose you." That is what makes us a church.

When we look at our life as a church, a community of God, we may seem to be losing our direction sometimes. We may seem to have no clear purpose. What are we supposed to be doing? What are our choices? And that is exactly the point of Jesus's words to his followers. We are not "who we are" because of "our choices". We are who we are because of God's choice. Let us never forget that.

The church is applauded all 'round because of what it does, the choices it makes. It is the overwhelming consensus of our society that the church is a good thing to have in the community because it does "good things". Of course, there are many organizations that we are members of and that we use to improve our community. We do good things through those groups.

But as long as we join ourselves together, we are not one body. There is one living thing that brings the people of God together. God loves us; we are a community. Not the things we choose to do - even the good things. Certainly not the things society tells us to do.

And society is always telling us what to do. Every where you look there is somebody with a little advice on how we in the church can get busy and make ourselves useful.

In the past couple of weeks I have been contacted by the representative of a service that wanted to "help my people get to know each other better because isn't that what the church is all about?" And I was called by a person who wanted a list of churches so he could send them information about a counseling service. And I get streams of opportunities to find out about stewardship programs which "raise money to strengthen leadership where it counts".

These are all good causes which do serve the community. But that is not the identity of the church.

The community of faith is unique. The church is a community. One living body centered around the One who gives us life. We are not individuals who have agreed to be religious together. We are a body. Brought together by one unifying will which is not our doing but is the doing of God.

People of God, do not loose your identity. Do not get confused about who you are by running after definitions the world provides for you. The world will tell you: "You are here to do good works." "To keep people on the straight and narrow." "To provide fellowship." "To provide inspiration." "To keep kids from spray-painting their initials in the park and distribute campaign materials for the moral candidates."

Those things do not provide our identity. They are not the answer to the question: "Are we the body of Christ?"

We are the body of Christ because he loves us; he chooses us. Empowered with that strength, filled with that grace - we can do greater things than we thought possible. The fruit that lasts.

So we must learn to identify ourselves. Not by what our history is. Not by the denominational label we put on the front door. Not by the part we play in society. But by what God does. We must understand ourselves as people who are loved by God. Whom God has called together. Whom God will keep together.

The community of faith is not identified by what that community does, nor how it looks, nor how big it is, nor how successful. It is identified by the fact that God stands at its center.

Just as we in the community are not identified by what we do, or how we look or how important or successful we are. We are identified by the fact that God has come into our lives as Jesus Christ.

In this morning's Gospel lesson, Jesus says, "I chose you." You are his disciple because he makes you his disciple. And then he tells us why. He wants us to love one another. He said he wants us to bear fruit, fruit that will last. More than short term projects we can come up with on our own. God has plans for your life. And God will give you the inspiration to new possibilities you had never considered. And God will give you the energy to love one another. The words are "Love one another as I have loved you."

Treasure the accomplishments in your life. Be wise and strong, and caring. The greatest virtue which can be ascribed to you ... is to be known by those around you as a person whom God loves. That is a virtue you have. Our life together is how God loves you. So we come together for our salvation.

Jesus says, "Love one another as I have loved you." And so he makes us a church,

It makes little difference what society thinks the church should be doing. It makes little difference why we ourselves think we are here. We are worshipping God this morning because God has called us. The church lives on the Spirit God breathes into it. We "love one another because Christ loves us." When we know that we are set free to be the people of God. Turn your attention to this community - and live in it. Serve it. Make it better.

Praise God for the body of Christ. It is his doing.

Look around at this body he has called together. And pray that you can remember at least ten names to write down - in case anyone ever asks if you've been saved.