



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: May 10, 2009

i am a little church...i lift my spire to merciful him, Ralph Ahlberg, Minister Emeritus

Genesis 28: 10-17 and John 15: 1-8

Some time ago when I read that an anniversary anthem had been commissioned by this congregation based on the poem by ee cummings I was both pleased and impressed. Since my college years I've admired the poet and even memorized this one;

*buffalo bill's defunct
riding his water-smooth-silver stallion and breaking one-two-three-four five pigeons just
like that.*

*Jesus he was a handsome man
and what I want to know is how do you like your blue-eyed boy mister death?*

Fascinating poem in a way, except that I've never figured out what it means. On the other hand, his poem entitled "i am a little church" does have a special meaning for me because it so activates my thinking about Round Hill.

It also reminds me of a good friend and professor at Hartford Seminary -- Carl Dudley -- who died late last month. He's written and spoken extensively and effectively about the little church. He's said, for example that "in a big world, the 'little' (small) church has remained intimate...In a fast world, the 'little' (small) church has been steady. In an expensive world, the 'little' (small) church has remained plain. In a complex world, the 'little' (small) church has remained simple. In a rational world, the 'little' (small) church has kept feeling. In a mobile world, the 'little' (small) church has been an anchor. And in an anonymous world, the 'little' (small) church calls us by name." (Making a Small Church Effective)

That description seems on target to me in reflecting, as I've known it, this congregation. So that intimacy, steadiness, simplicity, affectionate community life, and anchoring have described for me and I suspect for many of you what life in this Round Hill setting is all about.

As time permits, let me talk about some of these marks of this little church. What we're celebrating this morning is at least in part the anchoring to this place that we've experienced over the past twenty-five years. In our lesson this morning from the Hebrew Bible, the shady hero and scoundrel Jacob was chosen for leadership by God. And Jacob comes to respect and to honor a sacred place, a holy place where a mystical but real dream experience of God and God's promises to him changed his whole life. It marked him with a new vitality and purpose. "How awesome is this place..." said Jacob."This stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be a house

of God.” So it became not only a sacred memorial marking his instructing and motivating dream, but the place where it happened has remained one of the most popular and holy destinations of pilgrimage for vast numbers of people who visit the Holy Land

My point is that the respect given to a holy space like this building and this sanctuary is an unquestionable anchor to the human spirit. Most of us have seen Plymouth Rock, for example, where on December 21st, 1620, some bitterly cold Pilgrims landed on these shores after having framed what’s been called the Mayflower Compact. Whether or not that’s the actual rock the Pilgrims landed on, many of us have seen it as a sacred, anchoring place. And thousands visit it every year.

But for us as Christians, there’s an important qualification to this idea of a sacred place. As Cooper’s well-known hymn puts it: “Jesus, where ‘ere thy people meet, they behold thy mercy’s seat. Where ere they seek thee thou art found and every place is hallowed ground.” Which means to me that this space in which we gather, which we’ve come to love is all well and good. But we could gather anywhere and our worship would be as valid as it is here.

With that said, for many of us this particular and specific space will always be a sacred and anchoring place. Our instincts lead us to respect that where we’ve gathered for twenty-five years now has served so many as their spiritual home. My own memories, of course, revolve around Sunday worship here where at times, everything seemed to work. Lynn Kramer’s children’s time had our children spellbound with her imaginative teaching, the music was truly inspired and my homily seemed to connect the scripture with real life. And then there were the special times like Christmas and Easter, and the moving concerts by our very talented and committed choir, and Kabala’s amazing skills as an organist, conductor, choir master and (bringing the Bosendorfer to life) as a truly great pianist.

One very special time for me was one very hot and muggy August Saturday afternoon and my own daughter’s marriage when a thunder storm shut down the electricity / and the ice-cream began to melt in the Community House / and the organ, of course, made no sound at all. Then with the sudden surging return of electricity in the middle of the service the fire alarm was set off with a blast that militated against any pretence of dignity, and all we could do after the initial shock was to shake our heads, laugh and enjoy it. But these, you see, are anchoring memories and I suspect each of us has some of them: The hopeful celebrations of baptisms and confirmations, the marriages of daughters and the always too many painful memorial services -- and on and on through twenty-five years where I was here for about eleven of them. Where I learned again and again that this is truly a sacred space.

Robert Russell, a blind author, describes in his book *To Catch An Angel*, how he arranged things in his family cottage in front of the St. Lawrence River. He arranged things so that he could go fishing all by himself, even though he was blind. I think what he described also describes what this space might well mean to you and to me on this twenty-fifth anniversary.

He writes: “So that I can go out by myself whenever I please, I’ve run a wire down to the end of the dock, where I’ve mounted a large electric bell. Before I go down to the dock, I plug the line into an outlet which has a timing device that allows the bell to ring only once every thirty seconds. If I row too far upwind to be able to hear the bell, I can still fish without anxiety because I can always drift downwind and then I’m again in touch with my base. And a woman or a man needs a base to quest from, and he or she needs the sense, that however far one has strayed, return is always possible. Confidence that such a base is there... is what gives one the courage to reach past the edges of the familiar...The river lies before me, a constant invitation, a constant challenge, and my bell is the thread of sound along which I return. To my base.” That’s the quality of anchoring that I

hope many of us have experienced in this sacred space. This little church is truly an anchor.

But there are some other characteristics of this little church that I want to lift up. While the building, of course, is architecturally a prize-winner, it also reflects you. It reflects the people of this church. If you know the story of how this sanctuary was designed, you'll know that the people inspired it. And because of that, it seems to me, what's so compelling about Round Hill isn't only the building but the people who inhabit it. This is a congregation sufficiently little to have allowed not only self-determination but also the growth of an affectionate community life where it's members hear and listen to one another. It's been sufficiently little to allow its people to nurture one another.

The lesson we read from John's gospel, which is the gospel lection assigned for this Sunday, tells us how that happens. But a danger is that the words we read this morning are just too familiar. We've read or listened to them until they seem almost like another cliché. Even the explanations are so familiar that we're in danger of missing the profundity of their meaning. "I am the vine and you are the branches...abide in me...every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." (15:1,2)

Not long ago, in the wake of the Bernie Madoff scandal, a business school faculty member was sought out by a reporter to comment on a survey that asked corporate leaders what qualities and abilities they looked for in business school graduates. Ethical/moral values ranked ninth and integrity ranked eleventh, far below such things as financial skills, the ability to think and make decisions, marketing knowledge and motivational skills. These priorities, says the associate dean of this business school, might suggest why we've been so afflicted in recent times by so much dishonesty.

So, given a competitive culture where unethical behavior seems more the norm than the exception, the dean was asked how ethics gets taught? The answer this business school faculty member gave his interviewer -- at least in terms of meaning...was almost precisely what we read this morning from John's gospel. He said the best thing anyone facing the ethical pressures of today's world can do is to find the quality of a mentor who possesses integrity and moral balance. That person was to abide, to draw strength from something or someone greater than oneself.

Now, above all else, the imagery of abiding and having a connection to the vine carries with it both faithfulness to a mentor and the notion of community. And while I've pointed to one set of needs in the area of ethics, there are all kinds of human needs that need nurture and mentoring where the rough edges of life too often knick us in too many places. And the affectionate and nurturing vine of this little church whose Lord supplies the nourishment -- offers to many of us the sustenance of kindness and caring and the disinterested, selfless love that makes for happier life in a harsh world.

There are so many people who've been a part of the vine of Round Hill who've shared their lives here. They're women and men of great ability and character whose values come out of the heart of our Christian faith. I can't help but to think, for example of Beezy Brownell, who was a feisty lady, fearless in expressing an opinion (either religious or political) or in raising money for worthy causes, one of which was this church. She was one of the most remarkable people I've ever met, and I know that many of you will agree with me. The same goes for Muffie Robinson who had much to do with the interior accoutrements of this room and the parlor and for whose son one of the widows is dedicated as a memorial. Then there's John Shannon. John made a great impression on me. His career, I believe, was as a pilot with Pan American Airlines where he was among the very first or maybe even the first to fly commercially over the South American Andes. He must have been in his late eighties when I arrived here. I found him fiercely patriotic and an avid hunter, sportsman and golfer. He

won a national golf title at the Round Hill Club for those over ninety the same year that George Bendt won the title for men over eighty. Any way, when John discovered I'd arrived at Round Hill without golf clubs, it wasn't long before he had an old set of his re-gripped and sitting on the parsonage porch. When many within his age group get appropriately more sedentary, John was hunting somewhere in Maryland, sitting in a duck-blind living his life to the full. People like John Shannon or George Bendt aren't easily forgotten.

I'll stop with this, because we could be here all afternoon if I were to continue to talk about the people, living and dead, who've inspired me doubtless more than I've inspired them. My point is that the characteristic I've described as an affectionate community of caring, where the vine of God's nurture is real -- accurately describes the Round Hill Community Church.

Now before I close, just a word about the future. The past twenty-five years have much to celebrate, but what about the next twenty-five? Phyllis Tickle in her recent book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* describes both the large and small changes that have changed and are changing the church. I think it's interesting that about every five hundred years there's really dramatic change. There was Chalcedon in 451, an ecumenical council that shaped our definition of Jesus' nature in the incarnation. About five hundred years later brought the year 1054 when the Patriarch of Eastern Orthodoxy in Constantinople hurled his anathemas at Leo IX in Rome who responded with his bulls of excommunication -- and ever since the church has been divided. Five hundred years after that in 1517 most of us know about Luther and those who followed him. Once again both church and world were changed by the Protestant Reformation. Every five hundred years or so the church has been dramatically changed! And (bingo!) interestingly enough, about another five hundred years has passed, and it seems certain that the whole larger church, including this little church in backcountry Greenwich, will either adjust to the huge changes that are taking place in our world or go the way of dinosaur.

You see, the larger problem for all the church is the nibbling away of our credibility. I don't think, for example that Galileo or Darwin had anything against the church, but their new insights threatened some within the church and divided it. Freud and Einstein did the same. Our credibility suffered in our different interpretations of sacred scriptures on questions of slavery, women's rights, prohibition and homosexuality. A proud and contemporary atheist, Christopher Hitchens, and others like him blame religion for about everything that's gone wrong in the world. And just as profoundly, we're in danger of further marginalization by the i-pod or the Sony Walkman. When I see young people, their ears soundly plugged, walking down the street with their fingers clicking, their feet jazzing and their eyes half closed, I just know that the Pilgrim Hymnal, which served so well through almost all of my fifty years of ministry is now an antique which won't attract a new generation.

I, who love tradition, now access my information through reading newspapers on line. Recently I bought an amazing device called a Kindle. It allows me to access books in two or three minutes at half the price and no need for more bookcases. All of these realities are changing us. They're shaping the future.

With all of this said, however, I believe a little church like this one can look forward to an exciting next twenty-five years. Stanley Fish in last Monday's New York Times quoted an English critic named Terry Eagleton who wrote this: "A society of packaged fulfillment, administered desire, managerialized politics and consumerist economics is unlikely to cut to the depth where theological questions can ever be properly raised." Questions of meaning, questions like "why is there anything in the first place?" And questions like that can best be asked and struggled with in a setting just like this little church.

Someone once said that the church is like an anvil that's outworn many a hammer. I believe that's because as human beings we need the encouragement of a questioning and dialogical faith, and the depth of human experience we find in community, and having the privilege of listening to music of quality, and the satisfac-

tion of serving others through various programs of mission and benevolence.

So I continue to give thanks for the great privilege I experienced as a pastor here. And I thank you, dear friends, for allowing me to be a part of the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration of this building's dedication. And I thank you, in the words of ee cummings, for "lifting your spire" to a merciful God through all of our past and present and future years.

Prayer: Holy One, at this anniversary time we bring with us our gratitude for our memories of the past and our hopes for the future. In all things, we pray for the blessings that come upon the people of this congregation as they participate in the wholeness and health of Christ Jesus. May thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.