



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: May 31, 2009

The Bridge from Sunday to Monday, Shannon White

“Could a degree in theology be more valuable to a businessperson than an MBA?” Tom Chappell, the co-founder and former CEO of Tom’s of Maine says, “Yes!” Tom and his wife, Kate founded the all-natural care products company, based in Kennebunk, Maine in 1970 and watched it grow from a small regional company to a national corporation with a distribution in mainstream retail outlets. Still Tom found with all of the success, a certain emptiness about expanding product lines and making money. Lost in some confusion, he talked with a clergy friend and found himself asking about studying theology. He recalls saying, “I think I want to study more about theology. I’m not really understanding my mission in life.” So, he did...he went to Harvard Divinity School and out of that wrote the book, *The Soul of a Business: Managing Profit For the Common Good* in 1993. In it he said, “Studying theology turned out to be the best business decision I ever made.”

I interviewed Tom, a devout Episcopalian, when I co-hosted a radio show back in 2001 right as he was moving out of an active role in the company...He told me at that time that he really saw his business as a ministry that could make a difference in the world. And indeed, if you go to the company website as I did in preparation for this sermon, the current CEO, Tom O’Brien makes this statement right up front under the title of “Business Practices:”

Our work begins and ends with relationships. We start by respecting and empowering each other as co-workers, and build on that to develop true ties with our retail partners and vendors. The ultimate goal is to create honest and open relationships with everyone who uses our products, and believes, like us, that a company can and should be both successful and socially responsible.

Wow...that’s exciting to me...Here’s a man who has had a profound impact on the business world and has been successful by using his spiritual gifts.

There has been a growing trend in ministry over the last two decades to help people in churches bridge the gap between Sunday and the rest of the week. What good is it to come here on Sunday morning, worship, fellowship, do significant committee work, feel good, and then dump it on the curb as we leave to go attend to the rest of our lives? Maybe some of us don’t know HOW to bridge Sunday into Monday.

Ed White, one of the consultants on Staff of the Alban Institute, helps congregations move toward a focus on Lay ministry. In his paper, “Assumptions Behind the Movement for Ministry in Daily Life” his first three points are as follows:

1. God has a purpose for the life of each human being.
2. The primary “calling” or ministry for most laity is in the world not the church.
3. The primary task of the congregation is to develop mature disciples for ministry in the world.

Many of you are actively involved in the ministry to which you have been called both inside and outside of the congregation. You know, each of us was called to be a minister when we were baptized...we were given gifts at that time...and the Spirit, which we celebrate on Pentecost Sunday...this morning... empowers us to use

those gifts for the greater good.

In Ed White's idea of ministry, it is the lay community, not the preachers, who do the bulk of ministry. He says, "Congregations that are choosing to die, and there are lots of them, are still tied to the memories of the church in the 1950's when the pastor was the focal point, and all of the people gathered at the CHURCH to do their ministry." However, just as businesses have to adjust and change to the times, so does the church. That certainly does not mean that tradition is out with the wind...churches need to know and appreciate their roots and their history. What people who have studied the church for decades are saying is... the WAY the church operates in ministry through design and leadership needs to shift.

Bob's and my job as your clergy really should be to help guide and train the congregation and then cheer you on from the sidelines, and for the most part, that is what we do. But these are ideas that threaten some clergy who long for control and make some laity angry because it does not permit people to sit back and have the work done for them by the staff. There are no observers in this model.... But churches that are healthy and are growing are the ones who are willing to trust lay leadership more and more to lead the way. Clergy come and go...communities endure.

New life for the church! New life for people within the church!

So what does a church actively involved in nurturing and supporting the ministry of it's members look like? Perhaps it means having church programming that helps people think about what they do... theologically... like Tom Chappell did. It means we need to help people know what gifts the Spirit has given them and how those gifts might fit into their particular call. And then to continue to encourage them along the way.

Here are some questions Ed White suggests the leadership might use to help people begin to reflect:

1. What do you do all week long for "work" and for "leisure"?
2. What do you find most rewarding in your work...whether you are a CEO or a sales clerk, or a homemaker or an engineer, or a hairdresser, or a retiree who volunteers?
3. Is there anything in relation to your work that you consider ministry?

People are then helped to continue in their search until something fits for them. Some have found their callings vocationally and some avocationally. Here are two examples White lists that might be helpful: "a trash collector in Rhode Island who saw his job as an opportunity to be a good steward of the earth, and led the community in an exciting new recycling program. Another example was that of a clerk in a store who began to look at her customers differently. Based on their body language as they came through her line, she would ask her customers questions about their day and respond pastorally to them." And I bet you anything, these employees were more productive and happier on the job than some others in similar positions...because they had purpose.

And ALL of this helps to build up the church! This is precisely what Pentecost was all about. Pentecost actually is one of the most explosive times of creativity in the life of faithful communities that the church celebrates. It is the official launch of the post-Easter mission of the Christian movement. The liturgical history draws heavily on language and tradition of Judaism.

The festival of Pentecost in ancient and current times also known as the Festival of Weeks marks the end of the celebration of the Spring harvest and lasts until the Fall Festival of Booths. Jews praise God for God's grace and bounty. But, those who gathered and who witnessed the coming of the Spirit 50 days after Jesus' Resurrection experienced something that was mind-blowing.

Just as Jesus promised, the Spirit came and shattered the existence as the people there knew it. And that Spirit was poured out on everyone...everyone equally and abundantly. They were given power to do things they weren't able to do before, and their ministry made a lasting impact. They were able to understand people in new ways and they had the peace that Jesus had promised them while he was with them.

And all of that is promised for us today. The life-giving power of the Spirit is a gift. It can't be earned... it's not deserved, it's unexplainable, unpredictable and beyond reason.... But it is there for everyone. Precisely why many 21st century people are so afraid of the idea. One commentator says, ... "Life in the Spirit is life as God intends. It is to know a peace that the world cannot give. In our world that so desperately seeks peace in self-help and the ability to manipulate and control, it is crucial that we wrestle with these texts and their claim.

In a world devoid of wonder, they may begin to open us to experience the presence of mystery and the mystery of presence.”

What a perfect time of year to be in celebration of 25 years here in this building at Round Hill Community Church. We are experiencing a period in the life of our congregation when we have the opportunity to burst forth with new life...a renovation for the community house...a possible time of reflection with folks from the Alban Institute about who we are and how we want to be involved in ministry here. It's a perfect time for us to consider what our individual gifts are and how we can best utilize them both in and beyond the congregation.

This is a time to witness “New life for the church! New life for people within the church!” Let us be open to the guidance of that Spirit in our lives. Amen!