

“From Disciples to Colleagues”

Sermon, 5-13-12 (rev) – Reine Abele, Church of the Covenant

Social hierarchies can be self-defeating. The worst cases I know of were tragic airplane crashes. The black box recorders on board revealed they could have been avoided if the co-pilot had not been culturally conditioned. He deferred to the pilot even when he knew the pilot was terribly mistaken. That doesn't happen in US airplanes, thank God. It doesn't happen when my co-pilot is with me in our car.

Some of us have worked in hierarchical systems that were self-destructive. In one instance, subordinate staff were so humiliated by the boss that they spent hours each week trying to recover from their abuse. Whistle blowers in hierarchical situations are often ignored, or even punished.

The recent market crash was signaled long before it became tragically destructive – events from which the economy has yet to recover. The one who reported the dangers ahead was simply ignored.

We all started out in systems that were necessarily hierarchical – family by birth or by assignment. For most of us, the mothering person was our first boss – hopefully a benevolent one. Each of us had good enough mothering from someone to make it through childhood. It wasn't perfect, but we made it. Some of us were over protected; others were not protected enough. Ideally, the necessary sheltering turned to helpful equipping that enabled us to venture out safely on our own. The summer before our oldest daughter went off to college, we were on Newbury Street, crossing in the middle of the block. I reached out to take her hand; she refused it and looked at me with a frown that said: “Do you think I still need your help, Dad?” My guess is that now we might well hold hands crossing, not as father/daughter, but as friends.

A transformation has occurred in some systems that were once clearly hierarchical. Bosses are not only listening to their employees' suggestions, but actively seeking those suggestions much to the improvement of the whole operation. People who are included in decisions about their work are often more productive, as well.

I recently read of a mother who doesn't make snap judgements about what penalties a wayward child should receive. She sends them to their room with instructions to come up with their own ideas. Often, the children are inventive and more strict than she might be. What's more, they are much more accepting of their own sentencing.

Preparing for this sermon, I asked several people if their relationship with their mother or father ever went from parent to friend. Most were ambivalent about their response. Sometimes grown children have moments of friendship with their parents.

One person did note a significant move toward friendship based mostly on mutual high regard and the ways in which their professions seemed to overlap. I'd eager to hear of your experiences. Often it seems that parents sheltering children only turns eventually to grown children sheltering their aging parents, sometimes a problematic change, especially if you have to get them to give up their car keys.

Hierarchies usually seem to be the natural course of things. Those of us who have more than one child note the dominance that occurs – often because of age order, but sometimes because of unequal gifts. My big sister was in charge until I grew to be bigger than she was. Then she got after me verbally. I don't think I ever bettered her in that regard.

Among other animals, natural hierarchies are referred to as "pecking orders." Those who raise chickens sometimes employ strategies to ameliorate that effect, although it doesn't seem possible to eliminate it.

Children sometimes challenge parents about their place in the family, asking "Who do you love most?" Wise parents answer, I believe, "I love each of you for who you are." I'd like to add, "and God's love makes us one in love." Of course, family circumstances change. If families get more money, younger children often benefit. Younger children almost always benefit from the things their parents learned from the older ones.

Professional hierarchies have changed. Medical doctors are questioned about their diagnoses and prescriptions. I recently consulted a financial advisor and friend and she said she was getting some advice about a heart problem. It sounded difficult. I asked about a second opinion and she said that was what she was seeking. Many people read a lot about health matters and some look things up on the internet. Doctors aren't revered without question as they once were, although they are usually highly regarded and respected.

The same sorts of things could be said about lawyers and teachers and, of course, pastors. A fellow pastor who was part of a mutual support group with me once told of complaining to a trusted lay leader in the Church he served. "I don't have any authority!" "No, you don't," his friend replied, but you do have a great deal of influence."

Jesus' relationship with his of disciples seems to have been overwhelmingly hierarchical. He often corrected them, especially as he neared his tragic end and they simply could not fathom that terrible necessity. He had selected a special twelve; one each for the twelve tribes of God's chosen people. The gospel of Luke had noted

seventy, at one point. The twelve were present at the last supper. Even among the twelve, there were a special three: Peter, James and John. They were the three that Jesus took with him when he wrestled over the death that he knew was coming. Yet each of these needed to be reminded of their rightful place in God's plan for governing. According to Matthew's gospel, the mother of James and John had come to Jesus earlier to ask him to give her sons favored places in God's government, God's coming kingdom, which Jesus was to inaugurate. Jesus' response to them was to question whether they were ready to lay down their lives for God's governing. They said "yes" and Jesus said their sacrifice would be accepted.

Jesus' challenge to Peter was even more dramatic. At the last supper, Peter swore that he would lay down his life for his Lord. Jesus rebuked him saying that at the end, Peter would deny three times that he knew him. Nevertheless, Jesus took these three with him when he struggled over his coming sacrifice.

The gospel according to John fills out the nature of discipleship in significant ways. Jesus washes the disciples' feet, turning aside Peter's initial resistance. Following Jesus' resurrection, the disciples who went fishing had no luck until their risen Lord directed them to an overwhelming catch of fish; he cooked them a breakfast on the beach; and he told Peter three times that his renewed call would require sacrificial service.

The most hierarchical Church, apart from some personality controlled sects, is Roman Catholic. The one called the supreme father in that Church, known as the Pope, engages in a symbolic foot washing every Maundy Thursday. We have shared that practice among ourselves, too. But our foot washing is more or less egalitarian. Rob doesn't wash all the feet present, does he? There may be some ranking in the process among ourselves, anyway. It may be unavoidable.

We don't wash the feet of those who often sleep overnight on the doorstep of our church. We don't usually seek out those in need of help, however much we offer it through the women's lunch place and the food pantry.

Church hierarchies are especially vulnerable to misuse. Motivations to protect the whole Roman Church led to some tragic cover-ups of abuse. Doctrines of that Church that intend to promote heterosexual marriage, and faithfulness within it, painfully exclude those who we believe God created to love persons of their own gender. The forbidding of contraception leads to tragic consequences of unwanted pregnancy and more abortions.

In our own country, freedom from religious compulsion came when the variety of what we now call "denominations" tried to figure out how to make up a federation of states which were divided by their religious commitments. These states had sought

to find places for their own particular brand of religion and enforced it in their states as rigorously as in the old country, not counting, perhaps, Rhode Island. I don't know where congregationalism came from – certainly not from the self-righteous Pilgrims or Puritans. Perhaps from the growing independence of local Churches which took their separateness from the original closed colonies as an opportunity for self-rule. Nevertheless, many towns in Massachusetts were once dominated by their local Churches, often refusing to allow the town to employ someone not a member of that Church.

Jesus, according to John in our readings this morning, urged a movement from servanthood to friendship in their relationships with him. In my reading of that movement, Jesus was urging a change from discipleship to collegiality. Their call was to love and serve one another as Jesus had loved and served them. It wasn't a one on one relationship, but a unity in the spirit. Jesus didn't lay down his life – share his life, including them all -- for each one, one by one. They were, as the song says: "One in the Spirit, one in the Lord." They were incorporated in Jesus' body, infused with his blood. Their friendship with Jesus was a bond among them all, a collegial relationship in which they pledged to love each other and to reach out in love to others.

Furthermore, those who were called as disciples, that is, students and trainees, became apostles, representatives of their Lord; those who were charged with establishing the government of God, the kingdom of God.

Our calling as a Church now, welcoming all who would join us, is to be gathered as a serving body, filled with a spirit that enables us to reach beyond ourselves, extending our love to anyone who has need of it. We are called, all together, to be productive, joined mutually to the vine which is Jesus. We are Jesus' friends, no longer simply disciples, but colleagues and his representatives in loving service.

Join me now in reaffirming our mutual call that names Jesus our friend. Please change throughout the hymn, # 493 in the New Century hymnal from the singular to the plural. "O Jesus, we have promised to serve you to the end; remain forever near us, our Savior and our Friend: We shall not fear life's struggles if you are by our side, nor wander from the pathway if you will be our guide."