

# Transforming Community

September 9, In the Year of Our LORD, 2007

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Jeremiah 18:1-11 and Luke 14:34-35

"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Let us pray: Almighty and loving God, Who calls us to bear Your Word to the world, may we indeed be worthy, like salt that has *not* lost its taste, may we those persons who indeed do Your will – working for peace, justice, and grace for all the world's people. Bless the meditations of our hearts this day. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

Frankly, the project failed. The widows of Panacal, Guatemala, a poor village near the town of Rabinal and north of Guatemala City, with this congregation's support, tried a pump project with hopes it would enable them to irrigate their crops. Perhaps it was the wrong kind of pump. Perhaps the water table was too low. However, the project failed primarily because of a lack of community will. These women had much in common, in particular the loss of their husbands during the tumult of the civil strife and the massacres of all too many Mayan natives. But these women had something else in common, common to all humans: a sense of individuality that was distorted to the point they could no longer see beyond their own personal needs and wants. They didn't see themselves as an association, as a group, as a community and the result was bickering, divisions, mistrust of those who made decisions and those who handled funds.

There is nothing wrong with individualism. Each of us is a daughter or son of God with much to contribute as persons. In similar fashion, our relationship to God is one-on-one. God knows and loves each and every one of us personally, up-close – perhaps for some, *too close* for comfort. I was reminded of that sense that God loves and knows each of us individually when I walked along the replica of the Vietnam Memorial Wall here in Gates this weekend and looked at the names etched there. God knows the 58,245 men and 8 women not so much as an assemblage of those who lost their lives in the Vietnam conflict but as persons: sons, daughters, wives, husbands, siblings – and so much more. In the context of our faith, we affirm that each of us has something to give back to God and each of us has personal relationships important to us – but we also affirm and hold dear that it is in community, in communion, that we accomplish much of the ministry and mission to which God calls us! It is as the church, the assemblage of women and men of faith, that we can express and do good works, mission, ministry, and pursue the ways of peace and grace and hope!

The women of Panacal, with whom our mission team met earlier this week, are, in 2007, *still* individuals, persons with their own unique personalities and with their own sense of appropriate pride. But out of the failure of the pump project ... *came success!* We will share much more during next Sunday's Second Hour, but suffice it to say today that there is good news – that there has been real progress – particularly when it comes to the cow project we of this congregation financed. The two cows and one bull has grown to twelve cows, two calves, same (apparently busy) bull, and three more calves on the way! It might sound insignificant, but the system by

which the bull is moved from widow's cow to widow's cow in two week cycles is symptomatic of a major triumph: cooperation. Out of the failure of the pump project came a new resolve. Out of failure came a new determination to work cooperatively, to be the community they have become. Out of failure were sown the seeds that resulted in group decisions. We witnessed the debate and the decisions about the next step in their progress towards self-sufficiency – and self-sufficiency is the goal, a project which we as a church have now funded - to purchase hens *or* pigs. And what a difference the word “or” can make, for much of the debate for which we patiently sat in chairs on a house's mud floor was about whether it would be all pigs, all hens and roosters, whether each widow could choose, and ... whether a widow could participate if she showed an unwillingness to be part of the group – in other words, a sense of accountability. There was tough talk, raised voices – but a sense of community!

In that context, do we not realize that the Book of Jeremiah, which we so often call one of judgment and hope, even though the words are probably 95% judgment and 5% hope, that we could instead speak of it in the context of failure and hope. The people had failed as a community of faith. Individualism to the point of persons only interested in their own lives, ignorant of the needs of the community and the admonitions of their God – that individualism caused God to decide that the community, the Chosen People, the faithful of God, needed to know the cost of their failure to do the ministry and mission of God. God sent Jeremiah down to observe the work of a potter plying his trade. The potter was working at his wheel. As he worked, his creation became spoiled, misshapen, in essence ruined. As a potter is quickly prone to do, he reworked it, probably putting it back into a big glob before starting anew. By this time in his ministry, Jeremiah didn't need much coaxing to interpret God's message. Having found fatal flaws in His beloved people, it was time to rework the creation. At God's direction, the Babylonian army would destroy Jerusalem and only after decades of exile would the people be allowed to return and start the experiment all over again.

On the opposite end of the scale of the twenty-six widows of Panacal who we believe have learned the basics of cooperation and community – at the opposite end are the 2.5 million Guatemalans who today vote in national and regional elections. Candidates from fourteen political parties await the vote of their citizenry. While people in local areas will watch with interest the election of mayors (some of whom just started some public work projects – just in time for the election), town council members and representatives to the national assembly, most attention will be focused on the election of the new President. Even with three of the more major parties coming together into what is called the Grand National Alliance, there are ten candidates for the highest office in the land and it is unlikely any one will get more than 50% of the vote. That means a run-off between the top two on November 4. Tom Ward's choice, K'iche' Maya Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú Tum, garnered only 2% of the population in the most recent national poll, and dropped out of the race ten days ago. Sorry, Tom!

Guatemala has the most volatile political climate in Central America. (Haiti gets the dubious award for nations in the Caribbean.) As of yesterday, fifty persons, including the daughter of one of a candidate have lost their lives. While those of us who returned from Guatemala four days ago saw no signs of violence, a person had to be blind and deaf to not know an election was just days away. The blaring loudspeakers atop cars and trucks were mirrored visually as every, yes we mean *every*, utility pole in the nation had political candidates' faces plastered to them. The same was true of every *tree* in Guatemala City – only saplings were spared! Even the rocks

were painted, mostly by one party. Many rocks were painted over with the orange of another major political group. The tragedy is that there is serious doubt that the people of Guatemala have learned at a national level what the widows of Panacal have – that to transform the lives of all for the better, one has to learn how to live in community, together for the good of all.

God expects us to be the salt of the earth, with salt that has *not* lost its taste. God calls us to be strong and vital agents of change on behalf of the peoples of the world. God expects us as individuals to be persons of faith, to live in as Christ-like ways as possible, to live in ways of faith that calms us, inspires us and fills us with hope even in the most desperate of times. But, God also calls us to be a transforming community, that moves beyond the bounds of our personal needs and addresses – doesn't just talk about – but addresses in real and visceral ways a hurting community and a hurting world.

Every once in awhile, we seem to get it – much like the widows who after the failed pump project now see such wonderful success with cows. Six years ago, this week, it appeared that we as a nation “got it,” for an all too short period of time after 9/11 it was as though we cared more, looked out for each other more, and had embraced a sense of community all the more. Where has that attitude gone? Living in fear of more terrorist acts (which indeed are more than just possible), we have, unfortunately, lost that sense of community – we have embraced again the full scope of individualism that in part made this nation great but taken to the nth degree serves only to divide and negate the efforts we could so easily address as a community of faith, as a community that knows it is we, the church, who would transform the world to a place of grace and hope and peace.

It is a tenet of the Reformed Faith that in the sacrament of communion, we gather as that word suggests – as community – together, as one, transformed as persons of faith, but also transformed as a community that does the work of God with as much vitality and vim – as with salt that has not lost its taste – so that the world might be transformed in the Image of God its Creator.

In the name of that Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God: Amen!