

MAYFLOWER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
3901 NORTHWEST 63RD STREET
OKLAHOMA CITY, OK 73116
DR. ROBIN R. MEYERS, SENIOR MINISTER
405-842-8897
cysunday@mayflowerucc.org
www.mayflowerucc.org
© by Robin Meyers

Mayflower 12/27/09
Colossians 3:12-17
Radio 01/03/10

STARTING OVER

I saw a billboard once advertising Botox. The caption read: SHOW MOTHER NATURE WHO'S THE BOSS. On Christmas Eve, we were reminded once again just how foolish a slogan that is. That was a real blizzard, and sadly, people lost their lives. Even those of us who live in the city were reminded that we are at the mercy of nature, and that our best laid plans are just that. Countless people did not have the Christmas they planned, or see the people they planned to see.

If you were lucky enough to have a warm house to take shelter in, and plenty of food in the fridge, then you could enjoy having no choice about what to do or where to go. But chances are you spent Christmas morning with those who live under your roof and no more. It was a break in the routine, and sometimes that can be a blessing.

On Christmas Eve, Shawn and I put our two favorite chairs near the windows and watched it snow. It was as silent as I have ever heard the city. Silent Night, Holy Night — but I must say, I missed our service here. It would have been the 25th Christmas Eve service for me and my family, and it has come to be one of my favorite moments of the year. A family reunion of sorts, as the children and grandchildren of Mayflower folk gather in, and we see those we haven't seen for a long time.

I missed hearing "O Holy Night" and I was truly looking forward to the Vivaldi concert. I missed lighting all the candles in the sanctuary, being joined by my children and their spouses, and seeing your faces as I moved down the aisle with the light from the Christ candle. I missed singing "What Child is This?" and "O Come, All You Faithful." When we are not together on Christmas Eve, something very important to me is missing, and I am reminded of what this church means to me.

I was also reminded that when a storm hits, all the inequities of life are painfully illuminated. None of us had to go to a shelter, unless we got stuck in our car buying a last-minute Christmas gift. But I could not help but think of the homeless on Christmas Eve. Where did they go? How did some people, who live on the edge anyway, stay warm and find food?

The elderly man who wandered away from Baptist hospital and has not been seen since lives in my neighborhood. Some people spent the night in their cars and were reminded that the horseless carriage cannot measure up to the horse in a snowstorm. And if you're like me, you wish that people knew how to drive in the snow, or had been paying attention in science class when the teacher explained the concept of momentum. He who hesitates is stuck!

But mostly I thought of the poor, and the newly unemployed, and all those for whom it was going to be a difficult Christmas to begin with, and then were unable to see the family they had looked forward to seeing. I was reminded that it is a blessing to have one's adult children living in the same city, all of whom made it to our house on Christmas. And Blue's golden lab, Bella, has just given birth to eight puppies, and so we all made a pilgrimage over to his house for a puppy viewing. If you want one, please take a number.

We were not able to see Shawn's parents, who couldn't make it down from Wichita, or my parents, who live in Bellingham, Washington — and our distant siblings could only connect by phone, exclaiming, I saw Oklahoma City on the national news, are you OK? Some friends who live here and were away almost sounded as if they regretted missing the Blizzard of '09. And where are you? Florida? Boring.

And as the snow piled up against the door and the wind howled, I read the lectionary text for this Sunday from Colossians. Paul almost certainly did not write Colossians; and belongs to a group of disputed letters probably written by someone else who borrowed the name of the great missionary apostle. As it turns out, the most offensive material attributed to Paul concerning the status of women, and the embrace of slavery, were written by someone else, who softened and then even reversed Paul's original ideas — much as Jesus was domesticated over time.

These letters are products of their time, of course, and we must always remember to try to understand them in context. I watched a special on Abraham Lincoln the other night, and learned that in our admiration for this great and troubled president we begin to assume that he was not human. Or that he was never a young rascal and in love, or didn't know personal tragedy (three of his four sons died before they reached adulthood). Or that he had no

sexuality, because he's just that guy in the hat who freed the slaves and then got shot at the theater. In fact, he apparently visited a few houses of ill-repute in his younger days, and once asked a friend if he knew where he could "get some."

The lesson here is not to undo a great president, but to remember that over time we lose the ability to be objective about our own history. Paul is both appealing and appalling, but it now appears that the most offensive passages attributed to Paul were not even written by Paul — but in fact represent a reversal of his original positions on things like women and slavery.

And while the writer of Colossians does counsel, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord," he follows immediately with, "Husbands, love you wives and never treat them harshly." He tells children to obey their parents, but warns fathers not to provoke their children or they may lose heart. Even as the letter embraces the evil of slavery, as does the whole Bible, there is a tenderness to it as well, and in few places do we hear that more than in our text for this morning:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Did you hear that? It is an imperative. Because you have been forgiven, you are obligated to forgive. It's not a matter of, "Do I feel like forgiving old what's his name?" Or one these days, if she grovels enough, I'll consider letting by-gones be by-gones. I'll forgive, but I won't forget.

To bear with one another assumes we all do stupid things. We must not only put up with others, but we have to hope that others will put up with us. And in this new community, this body of Christ, we don't just forgive those who have wronged us because we think it's a lovely idea. We do it out of glad obligation, and a consequence of having been forgiven ourselves.

We say it every Sunday in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, AS we forgive our debtors." The way to recognize a Christian is not to hear him recite a list of doctrines to which he has given intellectual assent—I believe x, y, and z therefore I am a person of faith. Rather, we recognize Christians by their embodiment of grace, and the way they hold one another up, encourage one another, and forgive one another.

I know this sounds like church, and that's too bad, because this is really a radical idea. Do you have any idea what a powerful thing it is to forgive someone? Do you know how life-giving it can be, how liberating? Sometimes I think we don't ask forgiveness or offer it because there is power in milking the offense. When someone has wronged us, we have a certain amount of power over them that may come in handy.

And we worry that deep down if we forgive them, we have somehow condoned what they did, or that we are being manipulated. And of course, sometimes this is the case — sometimes people take advantage of the idea of forgiveness in order to be a serial offender and get away with it. But just think of how often people desperately want to be forgiven, and are truly sorry for what they have done, and forgiveness, which is the most God-like thing a human being can do, is withheld.

Here we are at the end of not only the year but the decade — I'm ready to be done with this decade. Historians will not regard it well, and we have much work to do to recover from the sins of this decade — and I do mean sins.

Shawn asked me what I was preaching about and I told her forgiveness, and as she is wont to do, she went to the heart of the matter: "Robin, are you planning to forgive George W. Bush?"

I just hate the way that woman messes with my head!

It's hard to forgive someone who never admitted to having made a mistake, and thought it was a sign of weakness to apologize. I don't think forgiveness is something we can just spray on people, like a fire hose, dousing them with forgiveness they haven't even requested, for sins they don't admit committing, much less regret. But if the former president asked for forgiveness and meant it, I would be compelled to offer it — and this is the scandal of our faith.

The church cannot just be a collection of people who are mean and judgmental but have their bags packed for heaven. We have to ACT differently in a world where there is no shortage of reasons to despair, and no shortage of people behaving badly. What would truly impress the world, however, is if we admitted to our own shortcomings and then refused to participate in the downward spiral of haughtiness that has so many of us trapped. I'll apologize when she apologizes. I'll forgive when he forgives. I have my standards you know.

Well, here are the new standards, listen: Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

Well, come on now, what do people think I am, a saint? Yes.

This is a collection of the saints? Look around . . . see any saints? See any angels? Look harder.

Now do this. Think of someone who has wronged you. I'm not kidding, this is not hypothetical. This is real. I'll give you a minute. . .

Think of someone you have a complaint against, or someone who has a complaint against you. Think of someone with whom you have recently exchanged unkind words. Think of someone you have not spoken to at all because you'd just as soon avoid that person as be aggravated by them. Relatives are not off limits! Sometimes we are mean to those close at hand.

Now take out your bulletin . . . I'll wait. This is not hypothetical. Write the person's name down. . .

No pencil? Then say the person name silently inside your head. I'll wait. This is not hypothetical. We can't go on until everyone is thinking of someone they need to forgive.

Now what are you going to do? I mean, you may think there's plenty of time, but for pete's sake, the decade is almost over, and you've got less time than you think.

I want you to make contact with that person this week. This is not hypothetical. A call is best, because your voice is best, but a hand-written note is good too — very powerful.

You can even use your bulletin for stationery, (tear off a piece and scratch out your note, since after all, we're all saints and this is the house of the saints. And then you can mail it in the morning. Or you can call in the morning, but no e-mail. E-mail may be efficient, but it has not soul.

You think I'm kidding, right? I'm not. I want all of us to start 2010 having asked someone else to restart the relationship. I want us to give up whatever power we think we have by being separated and angry, hurt, or offended. If you do this, you will not believe the power that is released. Even if the person

doesn't take you up on it, you have done the right thing, and made reconciliation possible.

And besides, you'd be surprised how long that person has been waiting for you to do exactly this, even as you have been waiting for that person to do exactly this. Who makes the first move? Love makes the first move. Love makes itself vulnerable, because we all stand in need of forgiveness, and we have all been empowered to forgive.

This is not a hypothetical. This is church.

Let me know what happens.



Copyright 2009 Robin Meyers