

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
August 29, 2010
Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

“Let Mutual Love Continue”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

On Friday morning, August 20th Richard Spencer brought his wife Paula to the Church parking lot so she could step into her role as Bus Captain on the big yellow school bus Maryellen McQueston had gotten and was driving to Cape Cod for Church Camp. The Maryellen bus, later dubbed, “The Magical Mystery Tour Bus,” was scheduled to load up at 10 AM with about 20 Church members and depart shortly thereafter for the Craigville Conference Center. Thirty other church members, arriving in private cars, planned on meeting the bus crew at the conference center on Cape Cod that afternoon.

Richard tells me that on that sunny Friday morning he observed how the bus travelers came to the parking lot, put their luggage under the bus and in the bus, chatted with each other, filed onto the bus and waved good-bye. It all seemed very pleasant, he told me, and people seemed excited!

Then, four days later on Monday afternoon, Richard was in the Church parking lot again when the Magical Mystery Tour Bus arrived BACK in Haydenville AFTER Church camp. Richard was there to pick up Paula and he says he noticed a big difference in the way the people getting OFF the bus interacted with each other. The children who had gotten on the bus clinging to their parents got off clinging to each other. They were one big undifferentiated kid clump—they had trouble separating and going home with their own parents. And the adults who got off the bus could not stop helping each other, getting each other’s luggage, hugging, and helping each other some more—the adults also (according to Richard) had difficulty separating, they were sort of one big clump too—like the kids.

Something significant happened at Church camp, Richard said to himself. Having been there myself, I can say with confidence, something significant DID happen at Church camp.

Three days after we returned from Cape Cod, I ran into Gary Stone, one of the Church campers, on Main Street in Northampton. I grabbed Gary up, gave him a big hug and said, “Wasn’t Church camp wonderful?”

Gary looked me in the eye, smiled, and said, “It changed me.”

Those are poignant words. Gary did not elaborate.

He just said, “It changed me.”

I nodded because it changed me too.

And I cannot stop thinking about how and why.

I got a clue about how and why Church Camp on Cape Cod changed me and I think changed us all when I read the Scripture lesson for today from the Book of Hebrews. In our reading for today from Hebrews, Chapter 13, we hear these opening words in verse 1: *Let mutual love continue.*

Those are four simple words: *let mutual love continue.* But I think those four words found in the Book of Hebrews serve as a good summary of what happened at Church camp and why it changed all of us there.

Some fifty of us ranging in age from seven weeks old to 60-something lived together for 3 ½ days in a retreat center walking distance from the Atlantic Ocean. The setting was beautiful, the meals were delightful, the weather was great. All that helped. But what changed us was us—how we interacted with each other and how God’s grace was showered in abundance on us individually and collectively.

Five minutes after everyone arrived at the retreat center we all gathered in the Common Room downstairs and had our first group meeting to discuss safety issues, the schedule, quiet hours and other logistical details. Immediately, at that first meeting, people seemed to drop all individual concerns and turn their attention completely to the well being of the group. During that meeting, the planning committee spelled out specific guidelines that would keep us all safe and comfortable during Church camp. But it was the **unspoken guidelines** that no one enumerated that emerged organically at camp that made the most profound difference—unspoken but clearly-felt guidelines bubbled up in the group through the grace of God, and THOSE shaped our time together. The un-named but powerful “God’s grace” guidelines that defined our time together included: no one would ever be left out OF any activity; there was to be no in crowd and no out crowd; everyone had a gift and something special to contribute to our shared camp experience; the children present were OUR children, we would all take responsibility for their well being; and mutual love and respect would inform every interaction.

These unspoken guidelines emerged in the group and our time together was nothing short of miraculous. No one was afraid; no one was alone unless they chose to be; leadership roles were shared around the group; everyone was safe physically, emotionally, and spiritually; no one's needs were unimportant and individual needs were met by the collective group.

To be more specific...this is how camp looked and felt...

Different adults in two's and three's played with the children, colored with them, rocked the babies to sleep, pushed the babies in strollers, took the younger ones to the beach, swam to the raft with the older kids, and included the teenagers in worship as leaders, seated up front.

Quieter members of the group sat attentively at the puzzle table and did a 1,500 piece puzzle in just two days.

The people in AA, NA, OA and Al-Anon met in the Gazebo behind the retreat center for 12-Step meetings—there they talked, cried and offered each other needed support.

The group of knitters perched on the couches in the Common Room and talked and knitted and taught people to knit. They welcomed people back from adventures and heard stories about every outing. They were the anchor in our common space—present, loving, busy and happy.

The beach goers gathered up anyone willing to walk to the ocean and took people down to bob in the waves, swim to the raft, look for shells and lounge on the sand. The beach goers included a 6 AM swim on our final morning! That swim at dawn IN THE RAIN included two teen-agers, bleary-eyed on the walk to the beach, but full of whoops and hollers once we jumped in.

We worshiped every morning and every, we sang at meals, around a camp fire and at other random times, we had a “No Talent Show” that was beyond hilarious, and we had a series of beautiful, creative and meaningful workshops.

Linda O’Dea summarized Church camp well when she said, “It was a lovely time, truly inclusive.” And, she added, “I felt held.”

For me personally, Church camp was an experience of COMMUNITY like I have rarely felt before. And I think that was due to the mutual love that we felt and demonstrated—the mutual love referred to in today's reading from Hebrews.

It was the **mutual** nature of the love, attention, caring, and trust that was the glue that kept us beating as one heart, moving as one body, functioning as one family.

And I believe it was that sense of mutual love named so succinctly in the Book of Hebrews that saw us through the hard times at Church camp as well. Everything did not go perfectly at camp—there were bumps along the way. But no one was left alone with their problem. All hardships were shared and solved as a group.

When Ezra, one of the triplets, spiked a high fever, and was clearly quite sick, we all stepped in to figure out what to do. The nurses present attended to Ezra, other church folks consulted with Dale, someone got in a cool bathtub with the baby—people pulled in close. When it was determined that Ezra had to go home...and that meant all the triplets, Parker and Dale had to go home, we knew someone had to travel in Dale's van with her back to Leeds to insure their safety. Moore stepped forward and volunteered to go and then a dozen people descended on Dale's room to pack up three cribs, several suitcases and mountains of baby stuff.

There was mutual support and love with each crisis we faced. It was not that our time together was perfect, it was that as a group we were resilient, resourceful and we pulled TOGETHER to meet every challenge that surfaced.

I remember when my son Sasha was born 22 years ago at Cooley Dickinson Hospital. He had a collapsed lung at birth and was immediately transported to the ICU at Bay State to be treated. I was filled with sorrow when they took Sasha from me and I was left at Cooley Dickinson without my son. When Sasha returned to my waiting arms two days later, I held him and thought: this is what heaven feels like....this is what the kingdom of God feels like...pure joy and perfection.

But at Church camp my definition of what heaven and the kingdom of God feel like was revised, altered, enlarged. I realized that the kingdom of God does not have to be a place or a time when nothing bad or scary happens, it is not a place or time of pure joy and perfection—it is a place, a time, a feeling that you are part of a community of love, trust and respect and that everything you face will be shared and solved together. The kingdom of God is not simply a moment of perfection and joy, it is a place, a feeling of being held with love and trust despite the hardships, challenges, and set-backs that occur in life. The kingdom of God is a feeling that that you are part of a strong community that will face every trial with you, a community that will bring their collective wisdom and deep love to your concerns and will provide the safety, support, and guidance that you need.

That is the **mutuality** lifted up in the Book of Hebrews.

Our Lectionary reading for today starts with four simple words: “*Let mutual love continue.*” And it closes with these words, “*Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*” BUT I think when mutual love is felt in community, doing good and sharing what you have does not feel like a sacrifice. I was surprised to observe over and over again at Church camp that when we were “doing good,” the line between the giver and the receiver blurred and disappeared. Parents would say “Thank you for caring for my child for two hours while I went to the beach!” And the care-givers would be surprised, “No,” I heard repeatedly, “Thank YOU for going to the beach and leaving your precious child in my care; we had a wonderful time together.”

When folks realized that the pond behind our retreat center was the perfect place to go fishing, a crew left for Hyannis to buy gear for the great fishing adventure. With patience and care, people taught Keenan to skewer a worm on a hook and cast out into the pond. After Keenan caught six fish, some still alive when he waved them in our faces, his mother Carey said, “Thank you so much for getting the gear and teaching my son to fish.” I heard Kayla reply, “No, thank YOU for bringing your kids to Camp, we are enjoying them so much.”

When Tony and Alison took tiny Corabella to the Emergency Room in Hyannis because they discovered a lump on the back of her neck and they returned rejoicing that the doctor said it was nothing, Tony said to the group in the Common Room, “I know everyone was praying for us. Thank you so much.” People responded, “Thank YOU for coming to Camp, for bringing Corabella, and for being a part of this whole experience.”

When there is mutual love, trust and respect, the line between giver and receiver is erased. When there is mutual love, trust and respect, the distinction between those serving and those being served disappears. When there is mutual love, trust and respect, there is an inbreaking of the kingdom of God and all things are possible.

Four days after we returned from Church camp I met with Lynn Fogg. Lynn said that the Church camp experience affected her deeply and she had been trying to figure out why it was so profound. True to her Lynn Fogg-ness, she did some reading and research about church retreats to determine what special, magical, grace-filled “stuff” happens when people of faith go away somewhere together. She found an article on-line and printed it out for me.

Under the heading “The Benefits of a Church Group Retreat” are these words:

When a church group takes time out for spiritual refreshment at a retreat, the entire church benefits. The unity developed among those at the retreat spreads through the entire congregation when the group returns to the wider fellowship.

That is my hope and my dream. We ALL are and have been for a long time a Church that values mutual love, trust and respect. Now some of us have had an experienced where that sense of mutuality was concentrated and intense. I know the Church camp experience can infiltrate into and throughout the congregation and our mutual love, trust and respect can be enhanced and intensified.

I believe the microcosm of the kingdom of God that we experienced as a big, wild, funny, weepy, needy, happy, self-sufficient, resourceful community eating, living and breathing a sense of mutual love, trust and respect will seep out into all we do in our wider Church family.

Gary Stone is right.

Church camp changed us.

And the experience will change us all over time because goodness leaks.

Goodness seeps out, it permeates what it touches, it crosses boundaries, it fills the space between people, it penetrates into corners.

On the final morning, 12 intrepid and slightly crazy Church campers gathered at 6 AM in the dark whispering to each other in the Common Room. Our plan was to trudge down to the beach and swim in the ocean in the rain. As we stood there thinking we were really nutty to tackle this one last ridiculous adventure, someone noticed that during the night Carey and children had put a hand-lettered poster on one of the big tables AND, surrounding the poster, was a hand-made card for every person on the trip.

I found my card on the table, picked it up and in the dim morning light read these words:

To Andrea,

We may not have everything we want, but here we have all that we need, now that we have found our Church home with you. We want to thank you so much for this weekend, it has been amazing for all of us.

Love, Carey, Keenan, Keiva, Kanaya, Lele and Zorihya.

We love you.

Let mutual love continue....

because mutual love changes us all. Amen.