

CHURCH OF THE GOOD Housekeeper

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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In the United Church of Christ this past year, there has been a lot of talk about church development and new church starts, brought about largely through the New Initiatives in Church Development program which we in Minnesota support through MSICD. I suppose that it is because of all this talk that I find myself fantasizing now and then about what it would be like to start a new church. Every time I go down to the Twin Cities for another denominational meeting, round about Hinckley, when the drive starts getting long and my thoughts begin to wander, I think about this mythical idealized church which I will start many someday down the road. This church of mine even has a name: it is the Church of the Good Housekeeper.

Now every time I bring up my new church start and tell people what I want to name it, they seem to either frown or laugh. They don't take me seriously. And I could be coy, and say that I have no idea why that is, but I am not so innocent. I know why people are surprised at my church's name, why they don't take it seriously? They've never seen a church before with a name like "Church of the Good Housekeeper," and they're not really sure that they want to think of either God or the institutional church in those terms. In fact, some are very sure that they don't like the image of the Good Housekeeper at all. But I would defend the name, first of all because it is entirely scriptural and secondly, because it conveys some important ideas about what the nature of the church should be.

The scriptural basis for the name comes from this morning's gospel lesson. In Chapter 15, Luke gives us three parables about the nature of God and God's relationship with us. The first is the parable of the Good Shepherd, which most of us are quite familiar with: the shepherd who searches out one lost sheep and rejoices when it is brought back to the fold. The third parable is even more familiar, the parable of the Good Father, also known as the parable of the prodigal son, in which the good father rejoices when his son who is lost comes back and is restored to him. We know these two parables well; they contain images of God which we have been taught from our childhood. But sandwiched between them is a third story, another image of God, which has been more or less ignored by the Christian tradition until lately. And that is the story, the image of God as the good housekeeper, God the woman, who if a single coin is lost in her house will search and search diligently until it is found, and then rejoice with her neighbors that that which is of value has been restored to her household. God, the Good Housekeeper, an image once lost in the tradition, now being reclaimed.

I must admit that though now I find the image of the Good Housekeeper easier to relate to than either the image of the shepherd or the father, it was not an easy image for me to accept at first. I doubt if it was easy for Jesus' original listeners, and I would guess that there are some of you now who have difficulty thinking of God in these terms. And I think that Jesus used that image precisely because it would cause difficulty, because in order to incorporate it, we have to move away from, to break through the images of God we have become comfortable with and begin thinking of God in new ways. It is true that throughout the Judeo-Christian heritage, whenever we have come up with anthropomorphic images of our God, those images have tended to be male-oriented: the image of the Hebraic judge, the King, Father, Shepherd. And there is nothing fundamentally wrong with those images; they say important things about who God is and how God is in relationship with us.

But sometimes, we, as human creatures tend to become idolatrous about our images. We want to chain God to those forms with which we are comfortable, and not allow God the freedom to be anything else to us. The second of the Ten Commandments says: "Thou shalt not make any graven images of God," not because there is anything wrong with images per se, but because once we find an image we are comfortable with, our tendency is to limit God to that image, to make God smaller than God really is. We recreate God in our image, rather than exploring what it means that all of us, in



all our diversity are created in the image of God.

There was a bad joke that went around several years ago that went sort of like this. The first person says, "You know, I've seen God." And the other person asks, "What is God like?" And the first person responds, "She's black." I never liked the joke because it seemed to me to trivialize the problem we have in our imaging of God. But it does point out the truth that God is as much black as white, as much female as male. The God whom we image as a King, who rules the universe, is faithfully imaged as well as the voice of Rachel crying for her children, or a faithful shepherd, or a good housekeeper. And in our worship, and in our private spiritual lives, we must take care if we are to use images of God, to carefully mix those images so that we allow God to be all that God is, not to tie God to any one particular form or any particular sex or any particular mood. We must take care not to become idolators, making God our creature rather than affirming that we are the creatures of a mysterious God, incomprehensible to us in the wholeness of God's very Godness.

To get back to the church of the Good Housekeeper, the first reason I would give that name to a church is because it does bring people up short; it makes a statement about the diversity of images appropriate to God which warns us away from idolatry. But that in itself would not be enough for me to give my mythical church that name. Beyond the name itself, there is much in the image of the good housekeeper which tells us about God and how God would be in relationship with us. In Luke's parable, the housekeeper is portrayed as one who will not let anything of value be lost in her house, one who rejoices when that which is valuable is brought to light. What this tells me about God is that all of us are to God as gold coins, we are valuable to God despite our varied brokenness and lack of perfection. Each human life is cherished, and no matter how we fall away and waste ourselves, God will always be there, searching for us, seeking to reclaim that which is valuable and precious to God in us, to restore us to right relationship within God's household. Imagine, if you will, a time when you have lost something of value to you--money, a piece of jewelry, important papers--and how you searched and cleaned and sorted through in your house looking for it. Remember how you felt when that which was lost was finally found? God is like that with us--a good housekeeper who will not rest until we are found.

Just as the image of the Housekeeper is appropriate to God, I believe it is also, especially, an appropriate name for a church. Just as the name "Pilgrim Church" makes a statement about how we image the church as a body of seekers on a journey to draw closer to God, so also I think the name "Church of the Good Housekeeper" makes an important statement about what the church should be. The first thing that name implies is that those of us in the church are there not to be served, but to serve, and beyond that even, that none of us is too important to serve even in the most mundane work of the church, the work that though necessary is often taken for granted and which no one really wants to do. One of the problems of being a good housekeeper is that people rarely think to value the housekeeper's work. They take it for granted, unless, of course, it is not done, in which case they get angry. One of the things that has always bothered me about church institutions is that despite all the passages in the New Testament where Jesus talks about the last being first, and the first, last, despite the vivid imagery of Jesus washing the disciples' feet in the gospel of John, there is still an arbitrary hierarchy of value in relationship to the completing of essential tasks in the church. It is easier to find someone willing to chair a major church board or committee than it is to find someone to organize the coffee hour. It is easier to find people to serve on the Diaconate than it is to find Sunday School teachers. Not long ago I talked with a woman who is a member of this church who told me that she had never done any important jobs in the church, when she had worked in the church school for over ten years, served as head of the Woman's Fellowship, organized and cooked countless church suppers, arranged receptions, visited shut-ins, made coffee and a whole host of other miscellaneous jobs. I realize that I am oversimplifying the case, but it is true



that certain jobs in the church carry more prestige or recognition than others, and yet the other jobs need doing just as much and are, in many cases, just as important to the church as the more highly recognized ones. In the Church of the Good Housekeeper all the gifts that people bring to the church would be equally valued and all would participate in the housekeeping chores of the church, a testimony to their common servanthood before God.

As well as emphasizing the identity of the church community as one which serves, the Church of the Good Housekeeper would emphasize itself as a household of faith where one is comfortably and hospitably received and made to feel part of the community. In large part that is what good housekeeping is about. Not simply cleaning or tidying for its own sake, but to exert oneself to make a house a comfortable and welcoming place to be, where people feel accepted and at, free to be themselves and to interact with others. Too often we in the church get so wrapped up in ourselves and our own particular tasks and acquaintances that we neglect to make our church home a welcoming and hospitable place for strangers. We forget to extend ourselves to make others feel comfortable in our house, to see that their needs are met, to find out the ways we can be of service to one another. We could all use a little more of the Good Housekeeper's instinct and concern if we wish to make the church a more caring, close-knit community.

Finally, the Church of the Good Housekeeper would be one which sees itself in partnership with God as a community covenanted to proclaim the value of all human persons and to work to reclaim the lives of all those who are lost in any way. There are so many who see their value diminished under the burdens of poverty and despair, loneliness and isolation, sickness and grief, injustice and oppression. The members of the Church of the Good Housekeeper would be individuals who responded to such situations, all the varieties of lostness, not out of duty, but from a sense of joy and gratitude towards the God who has given us and our lives value, who seeks always to find us in our lostness and to reclaim our lives to God's purpose. Good housekeepers are partners with God in the great work of human salvage from all the evils which can diminish the human spirit and cause our brothers and sisters to lose their way.

So that is my new church start; the Church of the Good Housekeeper. It is in fact my vision of what all churches should be: places where we learn to worship God in all God's wondrous diversity, communities where the gifts of all are appreciated and valued, and all do their share of maintenance work, spiritual homes where the love and caring of God are made clear through the welcoming of the community, a common voice speaking up for the value of all people and working to reclaim those lives which might be lost. Of course, it is easier to dream about a church that has yet to be, than to deal with the imperfections of churches that are already. I do not know of any church which in its common life lives up to the vision which it has of itself. And yet the visions are necessary to stretch our spirits and our abilities, to keep us moving in the right direction. And just you wait--many some days down the road you might just hear somewhere of a new church start and the name of the church will be the Church of the Good Housekeeper.

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