BUILDING A TENT

Galatians 1: 11-19

Pilgrim Congregational Church — Elizabeth Oettinger
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One of the joys of being married comes from learning new things from one's partner. For example, being married to an architect, I finally learned what a flying buttress is; I can tell the difference between a stud and a joist; only last week I learned the importance of flashing. There is a whole world out there of buildings and building materials that I had never really noticed before I met Chick, and certainly never talked about. Just a few days ago, we were talking about tents, and the peculiar structural qualities involved in building a tent. What is most interesting about tents is the combination of strength and flexibility that they embody. You take two poles and stretch a piece of fabric between them, and as long as it is held in tension, that fabric takes on really remarkable properties. It can withstand great force, and yet it is forgiving. You can bump your head on the side of a tent and the tent will give in response; however it will not collapse in the face of a thunderstorm or a sudden gust of wind. Strength and flexibility, these are the properties of material held in tension between two poles.

I could not help but think of building a tent as I read this morning's lesson from Paul's letter to the Galatians. A letter in which Paul alludes to his big controversy with the apostle Peter, the one whom he calls the "super-apostle." Peter and Paul, the two great pillars of the early church; Peter and Paul, both of them rightly called super-apostles. They were probably as diverse as two men could be. Paul was an upper class Pharisee, who wore fine clothes and had received the finest formal rabbinic education possible. He was a citizen of the Roman Empire, a cosmopolitan type, equally at home in the streets of Jerusalem or on the plain of the Acropolis in Athens. He had experienced an extraordinary conversion on the road to Damascus, and took, as his mission from that point on, the bringing of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the urban gentiles of the Roman Empire. In his experience, Judaism had nothing to do with the message of Jesus. He, as a Jew, had been a persecuter of Christians, and so significant was the break in his life between old and new when he became a Christian that he believed it made no difference what anyone's old life was when they began a new life in Jesus Christ. And so he went off and preached the gospel to the Greeks.

Peter's experience was very different. He was originally a poor and probably illiterate fisherman. He had no formal theological training. Peter was just a simple Palestinian Jew until he met the one he called Teacher. For several years, he traveled with the man Jesus, heard him teach, saw him heal, traveled with him only in the relatively small area between Galilee and Jerusalem, staying in Jewish communities, teaching in the synagagues, carrying on a discussion of faith within the community of the faithful: the chosen people, the people of God, the Jews. Peter argued, not without reason, that the good news of Jesus Christ, was a message intended only for that original community of faith, a final revealing of their God for those who already knew God and lived by the Torah, the most gracious will of God. To be a Christian, Peter asserted, one must first be a Jew.

This was the first great controversy of the Christian Church: could the gospel be preached only among the Jews or could gentiles be included as well. Paul believed the gentiles could and should be included. Peter believed equally adamantly that they should not. Both men were men of great faith and integrity; neither argued out of a jealous self-interest though both formulated their positions out of their personal history and experience. In faith they disagreed, pure and simple, and on this disagreement the infant church could very easily have foundered and ceased to exist.

But that is not what happened. The church did not split apart and crumble away because of the disagreement between its two great leaders. I believe that the reason that it did not has to do with the idea that the body of the church functions rather like the body of a tent--it functions best, is most flexible and strong, when the fabric of the church is held in tension between two poles. Within the church there will be always those who are leaders, people of strong and absolute convictions, and those convictions will not always be the same. Through people's different life experience, they will interpret the message of the Gospel differently; they will interpret the needs of the church differently; their views may even be directly in opposition to each other. And yet the church, to be its most Christian self, needs those strong voices of dissent and conflict to be the perimeters between which the whole body of the church stretches itself out to discern the way of the faithful. The church needs always the voice of Peter--the voice of tradition--and the voice of Paul--the voice of new interpretation of how God may be active in the world--and it needs between them the ears and voices of all Christians who will listen and pray, stretch themselves out between those two poles holding the church together and seeking God's will for the future. The church to be its strongest, most flexible self, needs both William Sloane Coffin and Jerry Falwell; it needs both Rosemary Reuther and Pope John Paul; it needs the World Council of Churches and the Institute for Democracy and Religion; and it needs you and me and all Christians everywhere to hear the conflicts of those who disagree in faith, and to find our positions somewhere in the middle, to hold the church in precious and creative tension, so that the will of God for the future may be discerned and acted out.

There is a myth abroad that when the church will become its most perfect self, when it is truly the body of Christ, then we will all agree, believe in the same way, and worship in the same way. I don't believe that that is true; I don't believe that that is an accurate reflection of God's will for us. What we must learn to do in the church is not all to agree, but to learn to disagree lovingly and in faith with each other, to make times and places to listen to each other and what we believe to make possible the creative tension which allows the church to grow in wisdom and spirit.

I have just returned from the annual meeting of the conference. The keynote speaker this year was a young Japanese-American woman named Cynthia Ikuta, who is the Chair of the Peace Theology Development Team of the United Church of Christ. Her commitment to peace and her theology of peacemaking have led her to become a tax resister. She has reduced the amount of her taxes by the percentage

of the budget used for military spending; she knows that to be an act of civil disobedience, and she is willing to take the consequences. During one of the breaks, I went up to try to speak with her, to tell her how much I admired her articulateness and her courage, and I got there in time to hear her discuss her position with someone from the meeting who was very much in opposition to what she was doing. She listened to the man, asked him some questions to clarify his position, and then said to him: "I understand what you say, and it makes sense from what you believe. I still believe that I am called by God to be a tax resister at this time in my life. I hope that you will pray for me and I will pray for you because the church needs both of our faithfulness in order to find the way of peacemaking." She was right. I would assume that all of us here would agree that God calls each of us to the task of peace making. If each of us were asked how we each believe that should be accomplished we would disagree. What is important is not that we all agree, but that we talk with one another, and support one another, as each of us tries to be faithful to what God is calling us to do in the realm of peacemaking. As Ms. Ikuta said in one of her addresses, "I do not ask you all to do what I am doing, or even to agree with what I am doing, but to find the voice of God as it speaks to you, and to do what God tells you to do in this endeavor." In order to be most faithfully the church, we need both the vision and stance of a Cynthia Ikuta and the stance of one who finds the way of peace through armaments; we need to listen, even to those we disagree with, and to judge, not whether or not they are right, but whether or not they speak out of faith, and then we need to find our own response in faith, reaching out to support with our love and our prayers even those whose interpretation we disagree with. In such a way will the church find its strength and flexibility and its future.

As we read the book of Acts, we see that eventually Peter sits down to eat with gentiles, a way of saying that Peter came to accept the gentiles as fully a part of the church. We learn that Paul takes up a collection among the gentile churches to support the work of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, an acknowledgement that Paul supported that struggling part of the church under Peter's jurisdiction. This came after Peter and Paul met and talked and resolved that even though they still disagreed at points, they would still be the church together. And so the infant church weathered its first great conflict. So will the church continue to resolve its conflicts. Not by suppressing dissent, but by talking openly and in faith about areas of disagreement, until through the creative and participatory tension between the poles of dissent, the will of God is found and the church moves forward one step into a more faithful future.