

## **Sermon for May 9, 2010**

### **The Rev. Marguerite C. Alley**

#### **Three Degrees of Separation**

Happy Rogation Sunday! Bet you didn't even know what an important day this is! Not unlike Septuagesima(3 before Lent), Sexagesima(2 before), Quinquagesima(Sunday before) and Whitsuntide(Pentecost), the word Rogation is not really heard in everyday conversation anymore. But aren't they just delicious words! And believe it or not they used to be common terms! I once read a letter from my grandfather to my grandmother who were separated (by the military) for 8 months during World War I. His letter reassured her that they would be seeing each other again on or around Septuagesima! I want to talk today about three degrees of separation. Some of us know the concept as being a statement about the connection between people. I want to look at it from the other end though, and actually look at how we are separated rather than how closely we can be connected.

Rogation is from the latin "rogare" or "to ask". Rogation Day is the day that we ask a blessing on our crops so that we have a good yield. In the "old Days" clergy would have also been out and about in the parish on Rogation Day. The metaphor of asking a blessing for a good yield is not lost on us at least from an evangelical standpoint! Clergy would travel to every corner of the parish and make contact with every member of the parish. (Remember now that a parish was a geographical entity, not just a group of people in a neighborhood). This event was referred to as "beating the bounds" and involved actually seeing the boundaries of the parish and more or less establishing who is in (and therefore his responsibility) and who is out (someone else's problem). This is our first degree of separation. Even once we left England, this being the only model we knew, we brought it with us to the colonies, and parishes became a part of our church.

This concept of establishing boundaries, while it has been with us for a long time, is the absolute antithesis of what Jesus taught. Our second degree of separation is in limiting God and how we will live in relationship with God. Last week, we heard John preach at the first two services about the difference between living by the Golden Rule and living by the Great Commandment. When we live by the Great Commandment, we push the boundaries of love to their absolute limit and then push more...because the limit is our doing, not God's. In the kingdom of God there is no limit on love. We live by a radical kind of love. Boundless, limitless and ever expanding. At the 11 o'clock service Bp. Hollerith talked about the development of the concept of love from (no love) the concept of unlimited retaliation to limited retaliation (an eye for and eye), limited love (love your neighbor, hate your enemy) to all encompassing love. The all- encompassing love, taught us by Jesus' life example is what we strive for today. The lesson we heard today from the Book of Revelation says specifically " I saw no temple, for God is the temple. There is no need for light, for the Lamb is the light." This passage makes it clear that heaven is open to all except that which brings death and destruction(21:27). We don't get to decide who is in and who is out. We don't get to decide who God will love and who God will not love...because God has already said..."all are my children".

Our third degree of separation comes when God invites us in and we continue to try to separate ourselves either by judgment against others or by refusing to accept the invitation. We can see ample evidence of our attempts at defining our physical boundaries...The Iron Curtain, the Great Wall of China, the Wailing Wall, the Berlin Wall, the Vietnam Wall of Remembrance. Some of these walls are intended to keep folks out, some to keep folks in and some to remember those who didn't come back. Seeing the evidence of our attempts to define our spiritual boundaries is not as easy. Despite Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ there is no East or West, no North or South, no Jew nor Greek, nor male and female, we live with the mindset of "us against them".

I recently had a discussion with someone who questioned the necessity of church attendance. I am also aware of many people who may feel that they come here week after week, get involved and participate, go out into the world and try to be good Christians and yet still feel a certain emptiness inside. Somehow you might feel that despite all the time and energy you put into “church” you really aren’t that different from your neighbor who treats everyone kindly and sleeps in on Sunday. I have never had a very solid answer for this....which probably explains why I am a Deacon and not a priest. Were it up to me.....you all would be out serving breakfast at JCOC instead of sitting here listening to me blather on about obscure terms we no longer use in the church! But in thinking about why church attendance might be important, I stumbled across an idea that might be worth sharing.

It seems to me that somewhere down the line we have made a fatal interpretive flaw. Somehow we have gone from believing “we are the body of Christ” to “Jesus is going to save me”. We have gone from “what can I do to further the kingdom of God” to “what will Jesus do for me, if I agree to believe”. We have gone from corporate to individual, from beloved child to in loco parentis, from part of a great cloud of witnesses to totally and utterly alone. It occurs to me that this might also sum up the difference between the Episcopal Church and some of the evangelical and mega churches that are so popular today. We are not designed to be alone. If we were, there would have been no Eve! Adam would have been just fine on his own.....although we know that he would have lived in a pig sty, only eaten stuff he could pick off a tree and never gone very far, because he would never stop and ask for directions.

In Genesis God tells Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac to prove his love for God. Just as he was about to kill his son, an angel speaks to him and stops him. Now we all know that taking the life of another human being is wrong. When we hear that someone has done this and proclaimed that God told them to do it, we are shocked and horrified, and we assume that they are not mentally well. And yet, the book that we profess to live by, the book that we proclaim is the word of God tells us that this is what God demanded of Abraham. And we, thousands of years later, admire him for his blind faith and absolute trust in God. So, we are left with a big dilemma in faith because either Abraham is no better than a murderer, and there are no grounds for admiring him; or our sense of what is right and wrong is not the final word. Perhaps, what we are intended to learn from the story of Abraham and Isaac is that every human relationship is haunted by the prospect of death. Love always ends as loss and suffering and we have to put our fear aside and be willing to take risks. Perhaps also we must consider that the question of how to respond to the suffering associated with love and loss is closely connected to the question of how to live in relation to God.

The most important thing I think we need to consider is that Abraham made his decision alone. He did not check in with Sarah to see what she thought of his plan. He didn’t seek out his friends and discuss what he felt God was calling him to do. To me, one of the most important things we can learn from this story is that when we choose to go it alone...we run the risk of making huge, if not irreparable mistakes. **That is why I must go to church.** I need you to keep me from going off the rails or at least someone to go off with me!

For those who might think that they aren’t really that different from their neighbors apart from the fact that we are here and they are at home, here is what separates us from them: Jesus tells us later in this gospel “I am the vine. You are the branches: (John 15:5). We are part of something much larger than ourselves. We are not separating ourselves, we are not trying to go alone and we are not proclaiming that we have found the answer either alone or as a church. We are inviting people to join us on a journey. Jesus also says,” if you don’t get it just yet, don’t worry, the Holy Spirit will teach you everything you need to know”. (14:25). But we have to be open to the teaching of the Holy Spirit. We must not decide that “I” (the individual) have unlocked the mystery or that we (one church) have uncovered the truth.

In considering this third degree of separation we should also take a look at the disciples and ask ourselves what separates us from them. More than time and cultural considerations, what separates us from them is a clarity of purpose. They were alive and charged up with new ideas and new possibilities. They were moved by the Holy Spirit to head in new directions...despite their very real fears of retaliation, rejection and just plain old change. The difference is also preparation. The disciples prayed for guidance, for clarity and for understanding each time they embarked on a Gospel mission. They trusted that God would equip them for their journey. Do we take the time to listen and to pray? When we sense the spirit moving us in a new direction do we dismiss it because we are busy or do we test it? If we test it, do we test it alone or do we seek affirmation from our church, our family and friends? The disciples didn't just walk out the door one day and say "I think I will go spread some good news today". They sat at the feet of Jesus and listened, asked questions, wrestled with what he taught, doubted themselves, doubted Jesus and doubted that they could make a difference. In the end though, they listened to each other, supported each other and sent each other out to do the work they were given to do with a clear purpose. Just as we do each Sunday when I say "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord".

If our purpose in mission is just to convince others to be like us, or to get more pledges or to show the world how much better off we are than they are because we love Jesus, then we have added yet another degree of separation! Instead, our purpose is to reflect the radical and boundless love we have found by tearing down walls and directly reflecting that radical love back on each other. Our purpose is to be bread and wine to nourish each other along the way, not to decide who gets to eat. Our purpose is to just live our lives in a way that God would be proud to call us children and Jesus would be proud to call us brothers and sisters. And I don't think I can do that alone.