

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Reception of New Members
on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2, 2010
Lessons: Ruth 1:14-18, Romans 12:1-5 and John 20:15-17

NO CARBON COPIES, NO COPY AND PASTE

“Climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow, ‘til you find your dream.” I gotta be me! Oh, I gotta be me.” “It’s my life. It’s now or never.” “Don’t make me over.” We humans are funny creatures. In songs and stories, we celebrate individuality, but in life we punish it, demanding instead conformity to the norms. Every child faces the contradiction: be yourself, but be very much like everyone else, too. “Hold your pencil the right way, not your way.” Every child learns, some easily but others painfully, that we have two needs in conflict with each other. I need and want to be myself, the unique person I am. I also, however, need and want to be accepted, liked, respected, valued, and sometimes loved by other people. I need to belong with others in family and community, to be welcome to contribute to the common good, but I also need the freedom to differ from those with whom I have a place of belonging.

Much of the pain in human life comes from the frequent conflicts between those two needs. How can I be bound together with other people and remain free to be myself? Refuse to conform to the group’s requirements and I face rejection. Conform too much, and I lose my self-respect and my freedom to grow and thrive as a person.

In Protestant Christianity, we have emphasized the uniqueness of each individual and the freedom in Christ granted each person to think, grow, and develop. We have celebrated the variety among us, insisting that God gives different gifts to different people to work together for the common good of the community of faith and our ministry as Christ’s church in the world. But don’t be fooled. We have insisted also upon doctrinal uniformity, and every group of human beings develops its norms and standards to which its members are pressured to conform. Did we not see in the 1960’s and early ‘70’s how very much the “nonconformists” looked alike, dressed alike, spoke alike, and parroted the nonconformist opinions?

Group pride almost always includes pride in not being “them,” meaning those in some other group held in contempt. Shared disgust at some others, not at all like us, is not only the glue that bonds the group but the source of group pride in which the individual member shares. So, no matter what my standing in my own group, at least I’m not one of them.

Sometimes we receive and perhaps give the advice, “Just be yourself, and don’t worry about what other people think of you.” It sounds simple enough. After all, what should be easier and more natural than being who I am? Unfortunately, it does not work. We are social creatures by nature and, as Christians, we would say also by the intention and will God. “It is not good for the human to be alone.” God created us for relationships, both personal and communal. We are far more interdependent than we often allow ourselves to realize.

I almost had to laugh the other day when a friend of a friend of mine on Facebook posted the proud declaration that she was raising her children to depend upon neither the government nor their parents. Interesting. So, these children will not attend public school and will grow up to be adults who do not drive on public roads, drink public water, use electricity from the power grid, buy government inspected food, accept Social Security or Medicare, vote, serve jury duty, call the police in crisis situations (their own or their neighbor’s), contact the fire department, or make any connection to the public sewer system. All that, and they won’t call home for advice or comfort. Neither will they work for anyone because, I assume, dependence upon a company, even a cooperative, would still restrict personal freedom, limit individual independence, and impose upon them a government-like, if not democratic, system of authority and responsibility – a boss or many bosses.

Freedom is wonderful. Autonomy – meaning unrelatedness, life unencumbered by the needs, griefs, joys, or desires of other people – lies biblically at the very root of sin and self-destruction. God created us for relationships, and Jesus summarized valid life in the two biblical commands that we love our God most of all and that, therefore, we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Freedom, of course, does not mean I can live any way I wish and do whatever I please, a law unto myself. That would be autonomy, and no human being is or should be autonomous. God is our God, and the other person is our neighbor — at least our neighbor, at best our sister or brother.

This morning we have the considerable pleasure of welcoming five new members into our congregation, each a unique individual loved and valued as a person by God. We can be happy we are not all alike, that we are bound together in Christ not by conformity but by mutual respect, compassion, faith, and hope.

Faith is not a check list of beliefs but an entrusting of self, life, and relationships to the grace of God as we receive that grace through our belief in Jesus, the Christ of God. Hope is not a wish list for a divine Santa Claus but our desire for the future of God’s making for ourselves, other people, and this bitterly divided and troubled world. Love is not, biblically, a sentiment (though hopefully there is warmth and feeling in our love) but a bond of mutuality with other people that moves us daily to reject the notion that life is just competition for “value added” and to embrace God’s reality that we are indeed sisters and

brothers of Jesus Christ, sharing each other's griefs and joys. More even, we are called by Christ to reach out into the world with a humbly assertive extension of this relational view of humanity. We are to recognize as sisters and brothers, not only our friends, but people who see us as fools, strangers, or even enemies.

Ruth is a foreigner in Naomi's homeland of Judah to which they now journey. Naomi is returning home but empty-handed and broken-hearted. Ruth must put herself at the mercy of a landowner and a citizenry that call her alien, stranger, outsider. Yet, she who is an outsider by birth and former life, binds herself and her future to Israel and Israel's God so strongly that she is given a place in Israel's history to which few can compare. A time would come when a man like Boaz who married a foreigner like Ruth would have to renounce her and their marriage to preserve the purity of the covenant people. Some scholars suspect the book of Ruth was put forward as protest against such marriage rending in the name of religious and ethnic purity. Whether that suspicion is valid or not, the foreigner Ruth becomes the mother of Obed whose grandson will be David, the great king, and the Gospel of Matthew names Ruth as an ancestor of Jesus.

Marie, Lori, Nancy, Sally, and Ted, we welcome you as our sisters and brother in Christ into the communion and community of the congregation of First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton. We welcome you as you, the people you are. I am not implying that any of us is yet as Jesus Christ calls us to be. God's grace welcomes and embraces all of us; it does not stamp any of us "approved" or "completed." But it is very important to recognize that God not only meets us where we are in life but also loves us for who we are, each different enough from the rest to be unique and irreplaceable to God.

The first title I gave this sermon was, "No Carbon Copies." Then, I realized I was showing my age, because some in our younger generations might ask, perhaps facetiously, "What's a carbon copy?" So, I added the computer terminology, "No Copy and Paste." Our faith community spans the generations, and we strive to understand each other. We do not seek conformity but, rather, mutuality. We need and want for you to be you — yes, a *you* continually growing in faith, hope, and love, a *you* learning together with us, and (like Ruth) merging your life story into our shared story as a church. We need what you bring in faith.

If Jesus could have said to Mary Magdalene, "Go and tell my disciples I am returning to the One who is my Father and my God," his resurrection would have vindicated him but meant nothing much to us. But what he says is, "I am returning to my Father *and your Father*, to my God *and your God*." In Christ, we are bound to each other, and in him we are also free. Amen.