

Snapshots from the Sanctuary
August 30, 2009
Lin Grace Rohr

When I came up with the sermon title, “Snapshots from the Sanctuary,” I had to consider that with the digital age...some in the sanctuary this morning, may not even know what a snapshot is. Suddenly, I felt very old. The term “snapshot” came into use about 1890; [no, I’m not that old!] the term was used to describe a casual photograph taken by an amateur with a small handheld camera. You will notice that scattered throughout the sanctuary this morning there are small, disposable cameras. We’ll get to them in a few minutes.

As we wind up this sermon series from I Corinthians, our summer series that we have been, since Pentecost, looking at “Receiving the Spirit ~ Embracing Our Gifts,” I want to give “verbal snapshots” of the Corinthian church from this last chapter of Paul’s letter. Our lesson started halfway through the last chapter, with five admonitions to the Corinthians, which really could be five admonitions to “the church of anywhere.” One: Be alert. In the Corinthian context, Paul was reminding them that Jesus’ promise to return could be immediate. Two thousand years later, the immediacy of that is lost but the idea of “being alert” is not lost on us. As people of faith we are to be alert so that we don’t fall into state of complacency. The content in Corinth was different but the intent of the warning is the same...we are be alert. The second admonition gives a clue why...keep alert...keep awake, there are things that can shake our faith and disrupt the unity of community if we’re not careful. The third and fourth admonitions are closely linked, “be courageous, be strong.” These two paired this way, echo the psalmist’s words, “Be strong and let your heart take courage,” [Psalm 31:24], an admonition of encouragement and hope, as much for the Corinthians in the 1st century as it is for us in the 21st century. And finally, the fifth admonition, is a simple statement of the central theme of the whole letter; “Let all that you do be done in love.” Click...the first snapshot.

The second snapshot from the letter focuses on the work of some in the Corinthian community ~ actions done by specific people for the common good. But Paul had to tread softly, because throughout the letter he had at times been carrying a pretty big stick. Remember people wrote Paul to address divisions in the Corinthian church, where some preferred one pastor over another, and also some gifts over others. This summer we’ve seen that Paul confronted them hard and here he doesn’t want to lose the power of that impact by drawing attention to his supporters. He had to be careful not to negate his message by losing it in the sea of congregational politics. Click!

The third snapshot from this chapter is one that puts on the “wide angle lens” reminding the Corinthians of their connection to the larger fellowship of Christians around the region. Click! The fourth is one that we have to appreciate...the beauty of this picture is clear, I can only imagine the challenge implicit in it...when the Corinthians who had been confronted on their divisions and disciplined by their founding pastor are told to give each other the sign of reconciliation, a holy kiss. Smack! I mean, click!

The fifth snapshot is a word of grace...Paul ends his letter how he began it. From "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus..." to "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you." Click!

And, the sixth snapshot, is one of a pastor's heart...after all that Paul has said he re-assures the Corinthians of his love...Click! Here we've just viewed a photo album of six snapshots that picture for us aspects of the Corinthian community; now let's turn to our own community of faith. We've already looked at the admonitions as they were admonitions to the church of anywhere. So, let's put Covenant in the set of the remaining five snapshots and see what develops. The second snapshot was the one where Paul was careful not to step on the toes of his people by playing into congregational politics. Just as there were congregational politics in the Corinthian church, we cannot deny that there are church politics in our denomination, and perhaps in every religious institution. Church politics is something we, like Paul, have to deal with, with gentle patience. But if I may be bold, let me try to get a snapshot of politics in our church and I'm not talking about church politics.

To help us with this sensitive topic, let us use those cameras I put in the pews. There are ten cameras placed throughout the sanctuary. Each camera has twenty-seven pictures to it. There have been roughly 240 to 290 people in worship this summer so theoretically there is a picture for each one of us to take. I know not everyone will choose to take a picture but I am encouraging you to do so, at some time this morning, whether here in the sanctuary or at the Deacon's picnic.

If there is a camera near you, pick it up, look through the view finder, frame a picture, and take it if you want. Usually we don't take pictures in worship but this sermon is about pictures...the different snapshots from the sanctuary. You won't be disrupting worship but illustrating the point. Now, think about this, even if you hand the camera to the person sitting right next to you, the picture they framed won't be the one you framed, even if it's in the same general area...even though your only sitting twelve inches apart. Even if you know them well...now think about the other nine cameras in the sanctuary, where others are framing their own pictures...certainly different perspectives than yours.

Now, what if someone wanted to get up, and take a picture from a different place in the sanctuary to get even another perspective. The possibilities are endless. If you are one that would like to get up and move around, take a picture from up here in the chancel, by the band or back in the foyer, I give you permission; children please ask your parents or grandparents. These different pictures represent the endless perspectives in the life of the church including the challenging topics like economics, education, ordination of gay and lesbian people, wars, justice issues, and politics. So just as an example of possible different perspectives, let's look at politics. There is a panorama of politics in pulpit. Some pastors experiencing their call to ministry as one to the "social gospel" fervently believe that the pulpit is the place for politics. Other pastors do not. Most are in the middle, and the same panorama goes for you, the people in the pews. We all have our own perspectives, including political convictions. Let me zoom in on some sections of that panorama of politics in church and people in the pew.

I asked the Thursday morning Men's group to give me their opinions on the subject of politics church and then I asked their permission to share those opinions with you. Here are some of the

comments. “We come together to worship God and to grow in our faith, not to talk about politics.” “Our faith informs our whole life including our politics...so it makes sense to have politics from the pulpit.” “Not in the pulpit, if from the pulpit, I don’t have a chance for rebuttal.” “We can’t talk about politics in church without fighting” “I’m okay with politics in general but not specifics, praying for people by name, for example, I don’t like that.” “I don’t want someone telling me what I should do or believe when it comes to politics, each one of us is in our own process.” “I don’t feel I know enough about my faith, so I come to church to learn and then my faith can shape my politics.” And then someone came to my office, representing an even more specific view, and again I asked their permission to share it, this person said, “If I were preaching the gospel, I would preach on healthcare reform.” These are snapshots from our sanctuary. This is Covenant. This is who we are...and just like the Corinthians our diversity in politics, or anything else, can divide us if we lose our focus, our unity in Christ. We’re aware of the impact of politics on our faith but more importantly we’re aware of the impact of our faith on our politics! And we experience it differently, but together, as a community of faith, with mutual respect and commitment for the common good, we live and serve. [Click.](#)

The third snapshot, from that 16th chapter of Corinthians, you may remember is the wide-angle lens of Paul reminding his congregation that they are a part of a larger community. Covenant does well with this. We are active in our Presbytery. We are involved in interfaith conversations. Our photo album here includes over 25 local and global institutions that we share of our time, talents and treasure and over twenty organizations with whom we share our building. [Click.](#) The fourth snapshot was “greet one another with a holy kiss” I can’t help but think of our passing of the peace. This ritual of greeting carries implicit guidance for reconciliation between us. In respect of all our differences we are to live in peace as a community of faith. [Click!](#) The fifth snapshot of grace is one that for the next three months, we are going to be focusing on in different ways in our next sermon series for the fall. We’ll look at grace with wide angle lenses, zoom lenses, and panoramic views. Framing what grace is and what it looks like in our community of faith and in the world. We may not be “picture perfect” but we are growing in grace. And we will be looking at that in our next sermon series, “Grace Happens.”

Finally, Paul’s parting word, the sixth snapshot, the one of his love for his community, is the same as mine for you. I am honored to be in the line of pastors who have loved this congregation. It is joy to serve with you. To encourage you and to challenge all of us to be the community of faith that God is calling us to be. To be the gifted community we are, using our gifts in love for the building up of the church and for serving others. [Click!](#)