

A Community of Grapes

Written by Bob Stone
Friday, 02 July 2010 00:00

“To dwell above with saints we love, oh that will be glory, but to dwell below with saints we know, well, that’s another story.” I think this couplet speaks accurately to the struggle many churches experience at times, as they attempt to be a community of believers. Our sinful tendency is to maintain our autonomy, demand our own way, and even reach out to take from, or pressure other Christians to get what we want. Thus by our behavior and isolation, we avoid the experience of community. In her book, *Up with Worship*, Anne Ortlund very clearly shows us the choices we have. She says, “Christians can be grouped into two categories - marbles and grapes. Marbles are 'single units that don't affect each other except in collision.' Grapes, on the other hand, mingle; each one is a 'part of the fragrance' of the church body.”

This description is certainly what the Scripture models for us. The early Christians in the book of Acts didn't bounce around like loose marbles, ricocheting in all directions because of their conflicts with each other. We could picture them as a cluster of ripe grapes, squeezed together by persecution, bleeding and mingling into one another. Fellowship for them was a genuine and free sharing of their lives as members joined together as one.

It's sad to think how many Christians today are missing that kind of closeness. Yes, sermons and songs are uplifting and necessary, but they provide only a part of a vital church encounter. We need involvement with others too. If we roll in and out of our church gatherings and growth groups each week without acquiring a few grape juice stains, we really haven't tasted the sweet wine of fellowship.

God's solution to our isolation is for us to see with new eyes both ourselves and those around us. God desires that we allow the Holy Spirit to soothe and break any hardness or abrasiveness that will inevitably come up in our relationships. It is most appropriate for us to become excited about the potential in our brothers and sisters and to be instruments of healing, correction, peace, and hope. We are to become one in Christ.

As we stay committed to that kind of “serving, bleeding, and mingling,” we will experience in a greater fashion what it means to be a community of grapes. We will also experience in even greater ways new believers being drawn into our fellowship because they love how we treat each other! “They’ll know we are Christians by our love”--John 13:35.

A Community of Grapes

Written by Bob Stone
Friday, 02 July 2010 00:00

A prayer for this kind of community is echoed in the prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi. It has stood the test of time and it describes what I hope will be my experience of church life. Oh that we accomplish the following goals outlined by Saint Francis: to be reconcilers, peacemakers, a people who make a difference, people who are part of the solution instead of part of the problem in maintaining community.

This prayer may suffer a bit from its familiarity to us, but try to listen again with new ears:

Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Where there is hatred let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is darkness, light; and
where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may
not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and
it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

All five of the destructive things listed in the first section could be at work either in our own lives, or in the lives of people we know: hatred, injury, doubt, darkness, and sadness. But we have a choice, along with St. Francis of Assisi, to express love in response to hatred; to offer forgiveness; to encourage faith; to shine the light of truth in the darkness, confusion, and despair; and to bring joy. I am so glad that at the church I serve, I have already seen their choice in action.

The second section also lists legitimate needs we all have. We all need consolation. We need to be understood. We need to be loved. But again, we make the choice to offer consolation, to extend understanding even if we don't feel understood, and to love aggressively, expressing an in-spite-of kind of love to those we come face-to-face with.

We can have the wonderful experience of being grapes instead of marbles in our church life. Let's not take for granted what we have received, but continue, "being eager to maintain the

A Community of Grapes

Written by Bob Stone
Friday, 02 July 2010 00:00

unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” If we do, grape juice will continue to be served to each other and to the world.