

Fiftieth Ordination Anniversary
May 27, 2009
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FIFTY YEARS

Fifty years is a long time to have the same job. And lots of things have changed during that half-century.

Back then things were very different. No one was walking on the moon. No one saw beyond the stars to billions of years into space. There were still prop planes flying to Europe and my first trip abroad took 16 hours on Icelandic Airlines.

The things we did from day to day were different - I grew up next to a farm - in Colonie - near Albany. I did farm chores after school and during the summer I mowed hay and brought it into the barn - sometimes with horses. When I was fourteen, I was driving a truck - or better - it was driving me!

It wasn't until I was in high school that television became available - for a select few. There was only one family in the neighborhood that had a TV and they had four kids, so we were all invited over to see Milton Burrell on Tuesday nights - it was the highlight of the week!

The mainline churches were very much alive back then. And my home congregation was a busy place. It wasn't a big congregation but it was well supported. We had a great Boy Scout Troop, and a very active youth group. In fact, half the kids in our Luther League - as our youth groups were called back then - married someone from the congregation.

And society was different in many ways as well. In a Sociology course I took at Union College in 1953, the professor noted that 80% of the people in the United States married someone who lived within ten blocks of them. This meant that those who married had a lot in common - the same ethnicity - similar economic status - same religion - an extended family and the same expectations from marriage.

And now hardly anyone marries someone with whom they grew up. And, of course, that means people often marry someone different - couples often

have different ethnicity, different religious back grounds, and they often come from different economic circumstances

Again, these different expectations about marriage sometimes make things difficult and when issues come up in marriage these days there are no family members within crying distance – so to speak – and you are on your own and that makes it even more difficult.

As you can see, these changes mean that there is a lot to contend with in our current society.

There are a lot of things to contend with in religion as well. In many neighborhoods the old congregations are gone or at least they are diminished. For Lutherans in Buffalo this has meant the disappearance of three-quarters of our churches. We have only five congregations left in the city, and two of them are marginal.

One problem, or course, is the loss of population in the city, and another is the fact that people don't go to church as much as they used to. There are reasons for this. In times past you went to church because your parents did and so did your grandparents as well as your uncles and aunts and cousins. The congregation was the social hub for families. Church kitchens were busy all week long.

And the congregation's youth group was often the best place to meet girls. Twenty-five years ago, our daughter, Linda, joined our youth group at Parkside. She was - and still is - very pretty, and when she joined we tripled the number of boys who came, and as you can guess, that meant more girls came because that was where the boys were!

Again – fifty years ago many young people married someone from their congregation. But today – virtually every teenager in our youth group will go away to college or to find work. And when they go away they will be meeting interesting people who are different– like nice Catholic kids, and nice Jewish kids, and even some Southern Baptists – but not at dances or beer parties.

Societal structures are so different that many of the things that gave our society stability and focus are now kaput – they are broken. And that has effected our congregations and our communities and the values connected to

them. Today, values are not so much community values as they are sensual and seductive.

The fact is that values are determined by what keeps the community going – not the other way around. If certain limits aren't set on communal behavior, the community can't survive.

You see that in the Bible – the rules were determined by the conditions needed for the community to survive. For instance, there were severe rules against stealing because things were scarce. So a person caught stealing had his hand cut off which meant he couldn't eat from the common food bowl. The rules for marriage were different back then as well. When the earth needed people, the Bible says men could have several wives and concubines. This need to populate the earth also explains the prohibition against any behavior that inhibited procreation such as homosexuality. Parents had to be respected in order for order to be kept. If you had a really bad kid he was taken to the gate and stoned.

But over the centuries as social circumstances changed, and the industrial revolution provided goods and food and services beyond anyone's imagination, the rules were relaxed. Now you can get away with a lot of stealing – it appears you can get away with stealing billions – at least you can for a long time. But stealing the small stuff doesn't cause many ripples. Most of us have had a car along the way that we prayed someone would steal.

Today we don't have too few people, we have too many people – so the norm of one wife per husband is the rule – at least one at a time – with a few exceptions in Utah, of course. Again, as circumstances change, the rules change.

There used to be a limerick that summed up past virtue pretty well.

**There was a young woman named mild
who kept herself undefiled,
By thinking of Jesus and social diseases
and the fear of having a child.**

For better or worse these are not things too many young women worry about these days.

Again, values seek the level of tolerance. If the consequences of actions do not seriously harm the community, you can get away with a lot.

And yet there are some things that become normative, and they are expressed well by Dag Hammarskald the former head of the United Nations in his book, MARKINGS.

You cannot play with the animal in you without becoming wholly animal – play with falsehood without forfeiting your right to the truth – play with cruelty without losing your sensitivity of mind. He who wishes to keep his garden tidy, does not sat aside a plot for weeds.
(p. 15)

Now what does all this have to do with being ordained fifty years? Well in a sense nothing, and in another sense everything. It doesn't mean much if you aren't interested in values. It means everything if you are religious, because it is the religious community that sustains our values and our perspective. It is the religious community that sustained me when I was a teenager, and it is that community of faith that sustains us when times are difficult, as Jill and I have experienced in your love and caring for us.

It is this community of faith - that Jesus established - that feeds us and nourishes us in spirit. It is this community of faith that has established the norm for our living – and it is expressed best in I John:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God; for God is love... No one has ever seen God. If we love one another God abides in us and his love is perfected in us... If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.
(4:7, 8, 18, 20)

Fifty years is a long time, but not long enough to do all that has to be done, and to adequately thank all those who made it all possible.

Still – “Thank you!” - with all my heart.