



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

CHEERS!

January 4, 2015

John 1.1-9

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to give witness to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

Q'ran (Koran) 9.71

(This is the only chapter in the Koran that does not begin with "In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful")

The true believers, both men and women, are friends to one another. They enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil; they attend to their prayers, and render the alms levy, and obey God and His apostle. On these God will have mercy. God is mighty and wise.

Hear also these words from a noted theologian heard regularly on television in years past:

*Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name,
and they're always glad you came.*

You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same...

You wanna go where people know that people are all the same....

You wanna go where everybody knows your name. (Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo)

So goes the theme song from the TV series 'Cheers,' the bar where the locals meet to share their stories and commiserate together for a half hour once a week, unless you're watching reruns when they meet daily. 'Having a place where everybody knows your name' could be the theme song of the church, as well. Churches, like bars, foster communities built around what sociologists like to call a 'commonality of desire.' As such, they are antidotes to loneliness, however noble, ignoble, or divergent their ostensible purposes may be, and because both are dedicated to altering human consciousness—churches by exalting it, bars by pickling it—they tend to engender a sense of mystery and wonder.

“In many American towns and cities,” writes Jonathan Miles, “zoning ordinances decree that churches and bars be buffered from one another by upward of a thousand feet. Among some drinkers, this is known as the ‘non-compete clause,’ because they insist, with a blasphemous grin, that churches and saloons serve some of the same functions for their congregations and compete for patrons. Churches and bars are not without their similarities. In some churches, people overfilled with the Spirit start speaking in strange tongues; in bars, people have been known to overfill on spirits and also speak in strange ways. The person serving you wine, in some churches, will patiently hear your confession; it’s the same in the saloon. Off-key singing is permitted in both places. The architecture of each is more or less circumscribed, from town to town, and both adhere to longstanding rituals and rites.

In his memoirs entitled *The Tender Bar*, J.R. Moehringer talks about Publicans, the saloon setting for his story, as something like the world itself. “We went there for everything we needed,” he writes of the corner bar, now defunct, in Manhasset, New York.. “We went there when thirsty, of course, and when hungry, and when dead tired. We went there when happy, to celebrate, and when sad, to talk. We went there when we needed to be found.”

He speaks about the need for company, for community, for the warmth of fellow believers. “Everyone has a holy place,” Moehringer writes, “where their heart is purer, their mind clearer, where they feel closer to God or love or truth or whatever it is they happen to worship.’ Moehringer’s holy place was this little gin mill in Manhasset with a liberal buyback policy and a negotiable closing time. The sacred and the profane, it seems, can coexist quite affably in the human heart, regardless of the zoning laws.” (Cheers! *Christian Century*, Feb 2006)

I have to say that my time with any of you who can come to Ballydoyle on any given week has been a delightful blessing, celebrating the sacred and the secular as one entity called life. Sometimes there are 10 or 12 of us; sometimes there have only been two of us. Sometimes we have something significant to talk about; sometimes we only talk about the weather. But it isn’t the conversation per se that pleases me; it’s the experience of people from New England Church getting to know one another by name. Here those who only wave across the pew to one another get to know each other by name.

The lectionary scripture for this first Sunday of the new year is about a man named John. A man whose name is known for the stories he told of God’s coming to the world as the Word made flesh, the light of the world, the man named Jesus. The names are familiar and easy to pass over, but they are important reminders that the community of faith that centers around this Jesus is a place where names are important, where everyone who gathers, and even those who can’t, are known and appreciated and valued for who they are. And around here we provide name tags so you can cheat if you can’t remember names easily. And you have permission to look at someone’s name tag as many times as you need to to call them by name.

Noted teacher and writer Huston Smith says that in the early church there were two characteristics that made the newly-born church attractive above other places where you could go where people would know your name. The first of these was mutual respect. One of the earliest observations by an outsider is, “See how these people love one another.” The church calls us to a love that goes

beyond the boundaries of just liking, to a new level of caring for the welfare of even the people we don't like, even the enemy, Jesus said. It is a love that abounds for others out of respect for the role they play on the stage of humanity. It should be a place where everyone knows your name.

The second distinctive quality of the early church, Huston says, was happiness. These early Christians were not large in number; they were not wealthy or powerful and they were in constant danger of being killed because of what they believed. Yet happiness pervaded their lives in a way that was difficult to describe. It was a radiance that transcended the obstacles, gracing them with a joy that permeated even the darkest situation. (Reasons for Joy, *Christian Century*, Oct 4, 2005)

So what makes the church where everybody knows your name different from the bar where everybody knows your name? What makes the church different from the library or the block party or a sporting event? It is found in the church's call to the difficult task of choosing good over evil, of not letting ourselves become addicted to the comforts of life at the expense of others' comforts, of challenging ourselves to go places in life that are uncomfortable in order to make the world more comfortable for everyone. It's a place where everybody knows your name but more importantly it's the place where you should know everybody else's name.

As vital as libraries are, they do not require that. As community-minded as block parties and neighborhood gatherings are, they don't expect that. As fun-loving as the camaraderie at a ball game is, that gathering doesn't require us to move beyond ourselves. The church has as its deepest conviction that everyone is loved, that everyone is accepted for who they are, that everyone deserves to be treated with respect, that everyone should be offered the opportunity for happiness and everyone should be known by name for the unique offering they are.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John, or Bill or Charles. There was a woman sent by God whose name was Mary, or Joan, or Martha. Insert your own name. We have come as witnesses to the light that welcomes all. We are not the light itself but point to the light that creates community and instills peace. It is our calling to be more than a bar or a church where everyone just knows your name, called to move beyond what is easy to embrace what is difficult, and because of that, the church is not as popular as other institutions. But though small, we can have a powerful impact upon the larger society; we empower others and create a sense of happiness when we treat them with respect and get to know them by name. So we come here week after week, year after year, to practice so we can get better at it out there.

The Word becomes flesh in us as we gather people in, as we go out of our way to know their name, and invite them to become part of creating community in here and out there. This is cause for New Year's celebration as we remember again our purpose around this communion table. As the year begins anew, be reminded that we are unique among the other social gathering places in the culture. It is a cause for celebration, so as we lift our communion glasses high in holy benediction in bar and church: Cheers!

--Gary L. McCann