

North Shore Congregational Church

Located in Fox Point, WI

April 19, 2015

Spinning Plates

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall

Sermon Summary:

On the day of candidacy with a new Sr. Minister, there are endless questions on the hearts and minds of the members of a congregation. While most of those questions don't yet have answers, there is one pledge and commitment that can be made without equivocation – and it is the commitment that, no matter what else we do, we will always hold true to our center plate!

Ok – cards on the table. You have questions! So many questions!

- Some of them are about me: ‘Who is this guy?’ ‘What matters to him?’ ‘What is he like in a meeting, in worship, at a backyard BBQ?’
- Some of them are about our family. ‘What do they like to do?’ ‘How do they spend their time?’ ‘How will Sharon be involved in the church?’ ‘Are the kids going to sing in the children’s choir?’
- And, many are about the ministry that will unfold in the months and years ahead: ‘What are his ideas for us?’ ‘What is he going to change?’ ‘What is he not going to change?’ ‘What new things are we going to do that we haven’t done before?’ ‘What current things that we’ve done before are we going to stop doing now?’ ‘Is he going to mess with that project, program, ministry or event that is so important to me?’

The list is almost endless. But, here’s the thing – we can’t do all that today.

- The truth is that it’s going to take time for you to get to know me, just as it will take time for me to get to know you.
- The truth is that it’s going to take time for Sharon and the kids to discern their place and purpose in the church in the years ahead.
- And, the truth is that all of those other questions – the questions about what we’re going to do, change, alter, begin anew, and so forth – I couldn’t even begin to answer any of those questions because, quite frankly, we don’t know yet.

But, the one thing I can tell you is that, no matter what else we may do, not do, try, not try, succeed on, fail in, or anything else – the one thing I can promise is that we will, in all things, remain focused on our center plate. To tell you what I mean by that, however, I have to share a story.

Many of you probably know, by now, that this call would be a bit of a homecoming for me. I grew up in Racine. So, this is home for me. I grew up going to County Stadium, the domes and Summerfest, our children’s Godparents live 35 minutes from here, I was ordained through an Ecclesiastical Council of the Wisconsin Association that was moderated by Karl Schimpf, and we are an entire family of Packer fans (I even managed to convert Sharon – who was a Bears fan

when we met)! But, anyway, growing up in Southeast Wisconsin meant that I, like many teens from the cities south of Milwaukee, spent my summers working at Great America.

I spent three years there, working as a 'lead' for host teams in the theater department. I spent one year at the Pictorium, and then two more as we opened the Batman Stunt show. But, every once in a while I would be floated around to other areas to help out, and one of my favorite shows was the Chinese Acrobats (I think they go by Peking Acrobats now). For those of you who may not know, this is the group of performers who will ride around on a unicycle with three people on their shoulders, build and stand on top of a 25 foot tower of chairs, or any of hundred other things that we could never imagine accomplishing in our wildest dreams. But, one of the acts that I always enjoyed was the man who spun the plates.

Most of you can probably picture this act. This is the act where there is a long table across the stage with some 11 thin spindles sticking straight up. On each end of the table there is a stack of plates. The person grabs a plate, puts it on the top of one of the spindles and starts to gently twirl the plate until it is steadily spinning on its own. Once he gets that one going, he moves on to the next. By the time that one is spinning, the first is starting to falter, so he runs back to get that one back up to speed, does the same for the second plate, and then launches a third. This process proceeds, and grows progressively more hectic, as he jumps from one plate to the next, some fall and need to be restarted, and this overall chaos ensues as he sprints back and forth across the stage until he finally has every plate spinning, takes his final bow, and then runs back to collect the plates before they all come crashing to the floor.

Well, when I was there, it was the patriarch of the clan of performers that did that particular piece of the show, and I had the opportunity to ask him, once, if there was a trick, a key, to getting all those plates spinning at the same time. What he said to me in that moment, however, is something I will never forget. He told me to watch the center plate. He told me that things will get crazy, that plates will fall, but that he never, ever, loses that center plate. "As long as I keep that center plate spinning," he said, "I know that, in time, everything else will come together."

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." And, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

- If you want to know the core of what we will explore together in the years ahead – it's that!
- If you want to know the one thing I am sure we will need and do in our shared ministries – it's that!
- If you want to understand the approach I will bring to the table, the ministry that we will seek to build together, and the communal faith life that we will share – it is that!
- If you want to know what this will all be about – it is that our center plate – that one thing that we will never let falter – the one thing that will always be our priority – the one thing that we will count on to be the foundation and core of everything else coming together – will be our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and our relationship with one another as a community of faith uplifted by the Holy Spirit.

There are so many ways that people can, and do, define the 'goal' or the 'objective' of faith – and as such, the core and purpose of the church.

- Some people say that faith is defined by a perfectly articulated theology and proper doctrine.
- Others will claim that faith is defined by right living and moral behavior.

- Still more will say that true faith is defined by worshiping the right way, holding the right stance on social issues, being a part of the right faith community, or even reading the right translation of the Bible.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest of all of the commandments, however, – when he was asked to come up with a summary of what truly matters in our lives of discipleship – he didn't respond with comments about where we worship, how we worship, what we give, what doctrine we proclaim, what political affiliation we hold, what social stances we take, what Bibles we read, what theological understandings we have, or any of the countless other standards that are so often lifted up as the litmus test for faith. No, when Jesus was asked about the greatest of all commandments – when he was asked to come up with a summary of what truly matters in our lives of discipleship – he went back to the words of the Deuteronomist and he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” And, then he added, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” When Jesus was asked what truly matters in a life of faith – he said that what truly matters is our relationship with God and our relationships with one another as God's children, period.

The truth is that I can't answer many of the questions that you have, this morning, because many of those answers don't exist yet. I had the opportunity to hear Karl's final sermon to this congregation back in January – a sermon I genuinely felt was extraordinarily well done – but one of the lines that really jumped out to me, in the midst of that sermon, was when Karl said, “I don't know how to be retired.” As simple as it was, that line struck me, profoundly, because I think that's the situation in which we all find ourselves moving forward. As much as Karl may not know how to be retired – this church doesn't know, yet, how to be North Shore Congregational Church with Karl retired. Many of you have never known this church with anything other than Karl as the Sr. Minister, and for those who did, the memory is so long removed that it carries little relevance to the ministry of today. And, as much as you don't know how to be North Shore Congregational Church without Karl in that office – I don't know, yet, exactly what it looks like to step in on the heels of a 32 years ministry as the new settled Minister. There aren't books on this – it doesn't happen enough for there to be data telling us what works and doesn't.

The simple truth is that I can't answer many of the questions that you have, this morning, because those answers don't exist, for us, yet.

- There will be many things we will try. Some will soar, some will falter, some will fail.
- There will be studies and discussions on theology, the Bible, on faith and life. Sometimes we will agree, sometimes we won't.
- We will strive, as individuals and as a community of faith, to live better and more faithful lives. Sometimes we will, sometimes we won't.

We will endeavor, we will explore, we will experiment, we will encourage – and along the way we will celebrate when things flourish and we will share grace with one another when things fall short. In what I truly hope and pray will be many years of ministry together some plates will spin, and some plates will fall, but that will be ok, because we will never lose our focus on that center plate – and in doing that, our growing relationships with God, and one another, will provide us the strength, the peace, the forgiveness, the grace and the hope to rejoice in every plate that spins and re-create and start anew each one that falls.

You have many questions, but I think they generally boil down to two: ‘Who is this guy?’ And, ‘What is he going to do?’ As far as who I am, and who my family is – that you're just going to have to take the time learn in the years ahead. And, as far as what we will do – that's something

we're going to have to figure out, together, as God guides us into this next chapter of the life of this church. What I can promise, however, is that we will never lose focus on that center plate: my relationship with you as Pastor, Teacher and Friend; your relationships with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ; and our united and individual relationships with God through the Holy Spirit. There are so many questions that you have, and so many to which we don't yet have answers, but there is one thing I can and will say for sure – it will be my foremost goal and objective to help us to remain always focused on that center plate. Because, I am fully convinced that, as long as we never lose sight of that priority, in time, everything else will come together.

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