

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

## **SERMONS IN PRINT**

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### ***“What Is The Church To Be About?”***

OUR FIRST READING FROM THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS (5:1-18). THIS LETTER FROM THE APOSTLE PAUL WAS AUTHORED IN AROUND 56 A.D. AND REFLECTS THE MANY CONCERNS THAT PAUL AND THE ELDERS HELD ABOUT THE EMERGING EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH. READING THIS SCRIPTURE HELPS ALL OF US AS CHRISTIANS IN “CENTERING” ON OUR TOPIC THIS MORNING, *WHAT IS THE CHURCH TO BE ABOUT?*

THE APOSTLE PAUL WAS A PERSON OF UNWAVERING FAITH. PAUL RECONIZED WELL THE MANY CHALLENGES CONFRONTING FOLLOWERS OF JESUS CHRIST IN THE 1ST CENTURY. THIS WAS WHEN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH WAS FORMING, LESS THAN 30 YEARS AFTER THE CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST. PAUL TELLS US THAT WE CHRISTIANS SHOULD “BOAST IN OUR SUFFERINGS...” PAUL WAS THE ONE APOSTLE WITH A KEEN KNACK FOR BOASTING. HE BOASTS ABOUT HIS OWN JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH, HE BOASTS ABOUT THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCHES STILL VERY MUCH A WORK-IN-PROGRESS. WE ASK OURSELVES, WHAT HE MEANT IN HIS EXHORTATION TO US “TO BOAST IN OUR SUFFERING?” HIS UNDERSTANDING OF THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST IS SIMPLE, YET PROFOUND. THE CENTRAL MESSAGE OF GOD IS HIS BOUNDLESS LOVE, UNDERSTANDING, GRACE AND FREEDOM TO HIS CHILDREN. THESE GIFTS SHOWER DOWN ON OUR EVERYDAY LIVES AND FILLS OUR HEART,

THESE ARE INDEED THE GIFTS FROM ALMIGHTY GOD.

WITH SUCH GRACE FROM GOD MEDIATED THROUGH OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST PERHAPS IT MAY SEEM THAT WE AS CHRISTIANS ARE “ALL SET”. THESE GIFTS CAN PREPARE US TO CONFRONT LIFE’S STRUGGLES AND SUFFERINGS. BUT ARE WE TRULY READY? IS THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AN ASSEMBLY OF INDIVIDUALS? OR, DOES GOD THROUGH JESUS SHOW US AN EVEN GREATER NEED? AT CALVARY THE SCRIPTURE ALLOWS US TO ENTER INTO THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN A REPENTANT CRIMINAL AND JESUS. TWO CRIMINALS AND JESUS WERE CRUXIFIED ON THE CROSS. [LUKE 23:42,43] AND THE WORDS FROM THE ONE REPENTANT SINNER TO JESUS SHOULD ECHO IN OUR HEARTS AND MINDS. THE REPENTANT CRIMINALS SAYS, “JESUS, REMEMBER ME WHEN YOU COME INTO YOUR KINGDOM”. RECALL ALSO THE WORDS IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW [18:20] ABOUT WHAT THE PRESENCE OF GOD. THE GOSPEL RELATES THAT FOR WHERE TWO OR MORE OF YOU ARE GATHERED IN MY NAME, I AM THERE AMONG YOU. HOLDING THOSE WORDS WE RETURN TO THE SCENE AT CALVARY. IN RESPONSE TO THE PLEA OF THE REPENTANT SINNER JESUS REPLIES, “TRULY I TELL YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE”. JESUS IN ASSEMBLY WITH HIS FOLLOWERS AND ANOTHER CRUXIFIED IS RECOGNIZING THE WAY IN WHICH CHRISTIANS NEED AND EMBRACE EACHOTHER. FOR THIS CRIMINAL WAS NOT TO FACE THE UNCERTAINTY OF DEATH ALONE ON CALVARY. JESUS IN HIS LIMITLESS COMPASSION AND IN THE MIDST OF HIS OWN DEATH SCENE COMFORTS THE

CRIMINAL WITH THE GOOD NEWS, THE GOSPEL. "TRULY I TELL YOU, TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE". THESE WORDS OF COMPASSION WERE FOLLOWED BY THE FINAL WORDS OF JESUS ON THAT DAY, "FATHER, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT." [LUKE 23:46B]. GOD HAD SENT AND SACRIFICED HIS ONLY SON TO GIVE TO US ALL A MESSAGE OF HOPE, REDEMPTION, AND EVERLASTING LIFE. JESUS KNEW WELL THAT HIS MISSION AS A TEACHER AND PROPHET WAS TO HELP THE MEMBERS OF THE EARLY CHURCH TO UNDERSTAND THE ESSENTIAL NATURE OF GATHERING AND FORMING AN ASSEMBLY.

THE SCENE AT CALVARY MAY WELL BE THE MOST PUBLIC, WELL-KNOWN GATHERING OR ASSEMBLY OF THE CHURCH OF THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS. THE LETTERS OF PAUL ESPECIALLY PROVIDE TO US KEEN INSIGHTS INTO THE WAY IN WHICH JESUS ENVISIONED THE "ASSEMBLY" OF HIS FOLLOWERS GOING FORWARD. THE BIBLICAL GREEK WORD USED TO CHARACTERIZE THE "ASSEMBLY"...THE "CHURCH" ...IS *EKKAKHOIA* (PRONOUNCED [i-klee-zhee-uh, -zee-uh])...FROM WHICH WE DERIVE THE WORD ECCLESIASTIC WHICH DESCRIBES A CHURCH CONGREGATION.

OUR PROTESTANT CONGREGATIONAL TRADITION MOST FAITHFULLY EMBODIES AND CONSTITUTES A *EKKAKHOIA*. WE IN THE WADING RIVER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH ARE AN ASSEMBLY OF FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS. THROUGH THIS TRADITION, EACH OF USE FREELY JOINED THIS CONGREGATION BASED UPON ONE OVERARCHING BELIEF. WE ALL INDIVIDUALLY HAVE EXPERIENCED AND PROFESSED A TRANSFORMING ENCOUNTER WITH GOD THROUGH OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. OUR CHURCH IS A CONGREGATION OF THE FAITHFUL BELIEVERS AND REFLECTS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT JESUS TAUGHT US ABOUT THE NEEDS TO FORM AN ASSEMBLY OF THE FAITHFUL.

BUT WHAT IS OUR *EKKAKHOIA*? OUR CHURCH TO BE ABOUT? IS OUR

CONGREGATION MOST CONCERNED ABOUT CARING FOR THOSE IN THE PEWS NEXT TO YOU? IS OUR CHURCH ABOUT CARING FOR OUR FAMILIES? IS THE CHURCH ABOUT CARING FOR OUR FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS? IS OUR CHURCH ABOUT CARING FOR ALL CHRISTIANS? CERTAINLY IT IS ALL OF THESE THINGS, BUT FOR A *EKKAKHOIA*, OUR EFFORTS IN CARING FOR THOSE JUST MENTIONED IS ONLY THE "TRUNK" OF THE MIGHTY CHRISTIAN TREE. THE ROOTS OF OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH SUPPORT, SUSTAIN, AND PROVIDE FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH OF ALL OF GOD'S CHILDREN. OUR COMPASSION FOR ALL PEOPLE IS BOUNDLESS, IF WE FREE HEARTS AND MINDS. OUR INNATE DESIRE TO SHARE OUR SPIRITUALITY AND GIFTS FROM GOD IS UNSTOPPABLE. OUR DEEPENING UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL PROVOKES US AND ALL CHRISTIANS TO FOLLOW THAT MIGHTY TREE FROM ITS ROOTS IN GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST TO THE VERY BRANCHES, TO THE NASCENT TWIGS, AND TO THE UNFURLING LATE SPRING LEAVES. OUR TRUE CHURCH IS THE MASSIVE CANOPY OF THE MIGHTY CHRISTIAN TREE, FROM WHICH NEW GROWTH MUST AND SHALL COME.

OUR COMPASSION AS MEMBERS OF THIS CHERISHED TRADITION AND CHURCH PROVOKE US TO INCLUDE IN ALL OF OUR HEARTS ALL OF GOD'S CHILDREN. WE AS CHRISTIANS AND CHILDREN OF GOD ARE PAINFULLY AWARE OF THE SUFFERING IN THE WORLD. WE FEEL DEEPLY IN OUR HEARTS THE PLIGHT OF THE SUFFERING ABOUT US. WE INCLUDE IN OUR PRAYERS THE PLIGHT OF THE HUMAN FAMILY TO WHICH WE BELONG. OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH AND GOD'S LOVE FOR US PROVOKE OUR HEARTS AND MINDS TO RECALL AND ACT IN RESPONSE TO SUCH SUFFERING. THERE ARE MANY EXAMPLES. THERE SEEMS TO BE TOO MANY EXAMPLES OF STAGGERING SUFFERING.

RECALL FOR A MOMENT THE PEOPLES IN TANGSHAN CHINA. TANGSHAN IS THE SITE OF THE DEADLIEST EARTHQUAKES IN MODERN TIMES. IMAGINE IF YOU POSSIBLE CAN ALL OF THE PEOPLE OF

SUFFOLK COUNTY WERE NOT JUST HOMELESS, BUT THAT THEIR HOMES WERE TOTALLY LOST TO DESTRUCTION. ALL OF THE HOMES IN SUFFOLK COUNTY GONE, BUT MILLIONS OF GOD'S CHILDREN IN NEED OF SIMPLE SHELTER, FOOD AND WATER. EVEN MORE STAGGERING, IMAGINE IF YOU CAN SO MANY FAMILIES. ENVISION PARENTS WITHOUT THEIR CHILDREN. IMAGINE THOUSANDS OF CHILDREN NOW WITHOUT THEIR PARENTS. CHILDREN GONE, PARENTS GONE, GRANDPARENT GONE, FAMILIES IRREPAIRABLY DEVASTED, AND EKKAHOIA GONE.

RECALL MYANMAR, THE SITE OF TROPICAL CYCLONE NARGIS, WHERE SIX WEEKS AFTER THE CYCLONE ADEQUATE FOOD AND WATER IS PROVIDED FOR LESS THAN ONE HALF OF THE 6.3 MILLION PEOPLE OF THE IRRAWADDY DELTA. THE LOSS SEEMS UNIMAGINABLE. MYANMAR SEEMS CLOSER TO US AS WE STILL ARE CONFRONTED WITH THE ON-GOING LOSSES THAT CAME TO THE GULF OF THE UNITED STATES IN AUGUST OF 2005 AS HURRICANE KATRINA.

RECALL LAST WEEK'S NEWS FROM THE MIDWEST. EASTERN IOWA'S RIVERS THIS MORNING ARE AT 17 FEET ABOVE FLOOD STAGE. TORNADOS TAKE YOUNG LIVES. THOUSANDS OF OUR FAMILY OF HUMANKIND MUST ENDURE LIVES WILL NEVER BE THE SAME. HOW CAN WE NOT FEEL THE PAIN WE SEE IN THE FACES IN THE NEWS?

HERE ON LONG ISLAND WE SEEM IN THE MIDST OF BLESSINGS SO GREAT. WE BENEFIT FROM A BOUNTY OF GIFTS THAT THE ENTIRE WORLD WOULD FIND UNIMAGINABLE, JUST AS WE FIND THE SUFFERING ABOUT US ALMOST UNIMAGINABLE. WE LOOK AROUND US HERE IN THIS CHURCH AND WE SEE OTHER FORMIDABLE CHALLENGES. THE UNCERTAINTIES OF AFFORDABLE MEDICAL AND HEALTH SERVICES IS A MODERN PLAGUE. CHALLENGING ECONOMIC NEWS BESET US AND WE ARE ANXIOUS AND UNCERTAIN ABOUT OUR FUTURES. SUCH CRISES, WHETHER LOCAL

OR GLOBAL, WHETHER RIVERSIDE CALIFORNIA OR RIVERHEAD NEW YORK, TEST OUR OWN FAITH TO THE LIMIT. WHEN LIFE BECOMES SO CHALLENGING, AS SO OFTEN IT DOES, WHERE DO WE TURN? WHEN JESUS SUFFERED AT CALVARY, WHEN PAUL SUFFERED STONINGS, WHERE AND TO WHOM DID THEY TURN? SIMPLY TURNING WITHIN ONESELF IS ONE FORM OF COPING WITH CHALLENGE, BUT JESUS BOTH TAUGHT US AND SHOWED US THE NEED FOR OUR CHURCH, AN ASSEMBLY OF THE FAITHFUL THAT CAN PROVIDE A SOLID TRUNK OF THAT MIGHTY TREE TO CENTER US, TO COMFORT US, TO GUIDE US.

YES MY FRIENDS, THERE IS A WORLD BEYOND THE FOUR WALLS OF THIS CHURCH, EXTENDING FROM OUR BACKYARDS TO WATERS OF THE IRRAWADDY DELTA. PLANTED IN THE CENTER OF THAT SCENE IS THE MIGHTY TREE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH. PLANTED BY GOD, EMBODIED IN THE LIFE, DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST, NOURISHED THROUGH THE CENTURIES AND MILLENNIA BY FAITH LIKE OUR OWN THIS TREE IS THE MIGHTIEST OF ALL. OUR CHURCH IS COMPOSED OF THE LIVING FIBER OF THAT TREE.

ALL PEOPLE ARE CHILDREN OF GOD. HERE IN OUR CHURCH WE ARE WITNESS TO OUR SHARED LIFE IN JESUS CHRIST. WE ALL SHARE WITH ONE ANOTHER THE MOST PRECIOUS BOUNTY, A BOUNTY OF LIFE FROM GOD, AN EVERLASTING LIFE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST. JESUS UNDERSTOOD WELL THE NATURE OF GOD'S CHILDREN. JESUS UNDERSTOOD WELL THE SOCIAL NATURE OF HUMAN BEINGS. WE ARE PEOPLE WHO NEED PEOPLE. THE LOVE AND GRACE OF GOD THAT WE EACH HOLD IN OUR HEARTS IS AMPLIFIED THROUGH OUR CHURCH, THROUGH OUR PEOPLE, THROUGH HUMANKIND. WE CAN SEE OUR FAITH VISIBLY AMPLIFIED IN OUR CHURCH. THROUGH THE YOUTH MINISTRY, THE BIBLE STUDY GROUPS, THROUGH THE FELLOWSHIPS, THROUGH THE OUTREACH TO THE COMMUNITY, AND THROUGH OUR MISSIONS TO THE WORLD WE REPRESENT

THE BEAUTY AND COMPLEXITY OF THE CHURCH AS IT IS AND AS IT CAN BE. THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE CHURCH LAST MONTH CAPTURED FOR MANY OF US THE MANY PRECIOUS WAYS IN WHICH OUR FAITH AND OUR ACTIONS AS A CHURCH REFLECT UPON WHAT JESUS TAUGHT US, THROUGH HIS WORDS LONG AGO AND THROUGH THE ACTIONS OF OUR CHURCH, GOD SPEAKS TO US.

WE KEEP IN MIND SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT ABOUT OF LIFE AS CHRISTIANS. IN THESE TIMES OF UNIMAGINABLE CHALLENGES, THE PEOPLES OF THE WORLD TURN TO THOSE OF FAITH AND ASK US DAUNTING QUESTIONS. THEIR QUERIES MAKE US PAUSE TO REFLECT ON OUR OWN FAITH. HOW CAN THIS BE HAPPENING TO US? THEY SAY. WHERE IS THE BENEFICENCE OF GOD IN THE WORLD? HOW CAN ONE CONFRONT SUCH CHALLENGES? THESE QUESTIONS ARE FAR TOO COMPLEX FOR SIMPLE ANSWERS FROM ANY ONE OF US, AS INDIVIDUALS. AS A CHURCH, HOWEVER, WE CAN ANSWER THE CHALLENGES AND THE QUESTIONS.

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTPATH OF JESUS CHRIST IS NEVER EASY. WE ARE COMPELLED BY OUR FAITH TO REACH OUT AND TO ENGAGE OUR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS. THEIR SUFFERING IS OUR SUFFERING. WE BOTH ANSWER THEIR QUESTIONS AND RECHARGE OUR OWN FAITH. THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE WHEN LIFE CHALLENGES THE VERY DEPTHS OF OUR FAITH. LET US RECALL AND RECITE TO EACH OTHER THAT THERE WILL NEVER BE A TIME, NO MATTER HOW CHALLENGING LIFE BECOMES, THAT WE CANNOT TURN TO EACH OTHER AND SHARE THE MERCY, COMPASSION, AND MANY GIFTS PROVIDED FROM GOD TO SUSTAIN US. OUR LIVES AS DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST, LIKE THOSE OF THE APOSTLES, ARE TRANSFORMED BY EMBRACING AND LIVING THE MESSAGE OF THE LIFE, TEACHINGS, DEATH AND RESSURECTION OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. GOD SPEAKS TO US IN MANY WAYS. THE "CHURCH", OUR CHURCH, AND OUR EKKAKHOIA PROVIDE A

TANGIBLE, VISIBLE, INSPIRING EXAMPLE OF HOW GOD BLESSES US AND ENABLES US TO ANSWER THE OPENING QUESTION. WHAT IS THE CHURCH TO BE ABOUT?

LET US KEEP IN MIND FRIENDS THE SCRIPTURE. JESUS REMINDS US THAT THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL, BUT THE WORKERS ARE FEW. WE ARE THE WORKERS. ALL OF US ARE SERVANTS OF GOD. WE ARE THE WORKERS (AND THERE IS ALWAYS TOO FEW OF US). OUR CHURCH BRINGS TOGETHER OUR GIFTS FROM GOD TO BOAST ABOUT OUR COLLECTIVE SUFFERING AS WE OVERCOME ADVERSITY. WE FIND SPIRITUAL ENERGY TO MOBILIZE OUR GIFTS TO INSURE A PELENTIFUL HARVEST. WHETHER WE FIND OURSELVES IN THE FIELDS OF THE IRRIWADDY DELTA, THE SHORES OF MYAMNAR, THE FIELDS OF IOWA, OR THE SHORES OF LONG ISLAND, WE ARE WORKERS, READY TO WORK. WITH GOD'S GRACE AND THROUGH OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST, WE CAN INSURE THAT PLENTIFUL HARVEST.

CONSIDER IF YOU WILL AN EKKAKHOIA OF JESUS FOLLOWERS COMPOSED FIRST OF JUST 12 APOSTLES, THEN 200+ FOLLOWERS IN THE EARLY 1ST CENTURY OF WHAT EMERGED AS THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, YOU MUST BE STUNNED BY THE GROWTH OF THE WORKERS. THOSE WITH FAITH IN GOD AND OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST HAVE EVANGELIZED AND BROUGHT THE GOSPEL TO MORE THAN 2 BILLION FAITHFUL. HOW MIGHTY A TREE IS THIS? WOULD NOT PAUL HAVE BOASTED OF THE EFFORT AND THE YIELD? WITH THIS IN MIND, JUST THINK OF WHAT GREAT THINGS CAN BE ACCOMPLISH AS WE WORK WITHIN AND THROUGH OUR CHURCH? THIS MY FRIENDS IS WHAT THE CHURCH IS ABOUT. THE CHURCH IS ABOUT US AND OUR MIGHTY CHRISTIAN TREE. THE FIELDS ARE PLENTIFUL, BUT THE WORKERS ARE FEW. LET'S ROLL UP OUR SLEAVES.