

“Church of the Crooked Futon”

I

For my money, it is one of the most daunting phrases in the entire English language: “Do-It-Yourself.” When I look back over the many personal setbacks and public humiliations I have suffered in my life, it would seem that most of them arose from some ill-conceived attempt to do something by myself, something that I really had no business doing.

There was, for example, the Great Futon Debacle of 2000. I was a 1<sup>st</sup> year seminary student, as was a friend of mine. I think it is safe to say that neither of us suffered from low self esteem. With one whole year of seminary under our belts, we thought of ourselves as intellectuals—scholars, really, gifted with more than our fair share of intelligence—and so we reasoned that, between the two of us, we should have no problem assembling her new futon from IKEA.

Have you ever tried to assemble a piece of furniture from IKEA? The “instructions” don’t have any words –it’s just pictures, pictures of screws and brackets and fasteners that somehow magically arrange themselves into a futon. IKEA “instructions” do not instruct you so much as they mock you and break your spirit and induce a sense of despair.

It was a long afternoon. Things got kind of tense. We used words they do not teach you in seminary. But at the end of our six-hour ordeal, we could point with pride to a brand new futon, which was, yes, a little crooked, but the point is *we did it*. We did it ourselves. And two weeks later, when it mysteriously collapsed, we did it ourselves again.

It is hard for me to admit my do-it-yourself failures, because ours is increasingly a do-it-yourself culture. I blame cable TV. Between the Food Network, HGTV and TLC, it seems like we’re all supposed to be 5-star French chefs, who make our own one-of-a-kind pottery, while spending our weekends buying, rehabbing and flipping distressed properties for profit and fun. In this day and age, only losers ask for help. It’s a do-it-yourself world out there.

And that is just one of the many reasons why the Christian faith seems so weird, so deeply out-of-step with a do-it-yourself world. As this passage from John’s Gospel reminds us, Christianity is not a do-it-yourself affair. It’s not really something we do at all. It is more like something that is done to us.

II

Our reading picks up where we left off last week –right in the middle of the long goodbye. It is his last meal with his closest friends, and Jesus is breaking the bad news. Somewhere between the salad and the entrée, he tells them that he is about to be betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted and killed. Of course the disciples have a hard time hearing this. It triggers all sorts of anxieties. What will they do when Jesus departs? How will they carry on without him? So Jesus responds to his followers’ fears. He comforts them, he consoles them, he prepares them for life after he is gone.

This particular passage begins and ends with almost identical statements: *If you love me*, says Jesus, *you will keep my commandments*. “Commandment” is not a common

word in the Gospel of John. In the entire Gospel, there is, in fact, only one commandment which Jesus issues to his followers. In the chapter just before this one, Jesus gave his disciples what he called “a new commandment.” He told them to love one another just as he has loved them.<sup>1</sup> And now, one chapter later, Jesus is just doing what all preachers do –employing repetition to drive his point home. If they love Jesus, they will keep that commandment. If they love Jesus, they will love each other.<sup>2</sup>

And so right here, from Jesus’ own lips, we have the very first mission statement for the church. On this last night with the disciples, Jesus lays the groundwork for what will come next –the community that will carry on his work after he has left the scene. Now we know its purpose: the new community will keep the new commandment. The church will live out the love of Jesus. That is what we are here to do.

But, Jesus quickly adds, don’t try this on your own. Don’t take this on as another do-it-yourself project. Jesus knows that, left to their own devices, the disciples would just make a mess of it. Verse 16: *And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.* Jesus may be leaving the disciples to carry on without him, but he will not leave them alone. Another One is on the way –the One Jesus calls the “Advocate” or Counselor or Comforter or helper –in short, the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

What we have in this passage is the promise of Pentecost. Just as God has been with the disciples in Jesus, so God will continue to be with the church. The Holy Spirit—God herself—will dwell with us and work through us and enable us to do what Jesus just asked us to do. We *will* love God and we *will* love each other –more than we can realize, maybe more than we ever thought possible, because the love of God will live among us.<sup>4</sup>

### III

I know, I know. It is enough to make you question God’s taste in dwelling places. I mean, the church? Really? The church is the place that God chooses to dwell, the way God works in the world? The church of potluck suppers and petty fights and the appointment of subcommittees to study the question of painting the nursery a different shade of yellow? God promised to abide with us...here?

It makes some sense, actually. God has done this sort of thing before. This passage has a parallel in the first chapter of John’s Gospel. There we read that *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*<sup>5</sup>. God has *already* entered the world in the person of a scruffy peasant rabbi who wandered around in obscurity with a small band of followers and died the death of a common criminal. The presence of God-in-Christ was easily overlooked and entirely human.

So why wouldn’t God do that again? Why wouldn’t God show up someplace like the church, with all of its warts and foibles and flaws? Maybe God prefers to be present in and with and through an all-too-human community. Maybe God relishes the challenge of working in the messy medium of our life together. Maybe God has got a really weird sense of humor.

For whatever reason, this much is clear: God has promised to meet us *here*—right here in the middle of our board meetings and confirmation theme nights and shelter meals and classes and choir rehearsals. Even the occasional worship service. And God does this for a reason. God meets us here because God means to make us into a people who *love* –who love each other and who love the world, just as Jesus loves us.

Church is not something we *do*; church is something that God does to us.

#### IV

Or it would be, if we would ever get out of the way. I don't know about you, but I am not wild about the idea of having something done to me; I would rather remain in control. I would much rather do it myself. And so often I come to church, not to encounter the God who changes me, but to set aside a little time to tinker with myself - chip away at my bad habits, polish up my virtues, sharpen my spiritual self-awareness. You can create a whole community around that –a society for self-improvement, with weekly meetings to pursue our common interest in stained glass and sacred music. Church can turn into another do-it-yourself project. It happens all the time.

We have a motto around here and, as mottos go, it's a pretty good one: *We agree to differ. We resolve to love. We unite to serve.*<sup>6</sup> But how does that motto play out in the do-it-yourself church? We agree to differ –and that's about as far as we get. We tolerate each other. We put up with each other. I don't step on your toes and you don't step on mine. *Resolving to love* and *uniting to serve* sound great but, really, realistically, given the current state of our resources, agreeing to differ is about the best we can do. That is the way it goes in a do-it-yourself church.

What is the Dr Phil question? “How is that working for you?” How is that working for us? How does a do-it-yourself church compare to this vision in the Gospel of John? From where I'm standing, it kind of looks like that futon I tried to put together: precarious, unbalanced, less-than-stable. I guess churches and futons have something in common: In both cases, even the best that we can do on our own tends to fall far short of the picture that came with the instructions.

But the good news is this: the church is not about what *we* can do. Never has been. Church is about what God can do in our midst. And the church motto is not some set of instructions handed to us in the hope that we can figure this thing out; the motto is a promise of what can and will happen when the Spirit shows up and we get out of the way. Our life together can transcend mere tolerance and take its root in the deep deep love of God. The love that we share in this place can overflow these walls, can spill into the streets, can send us out to serve a hurting world. The Spirit can still take this whole business out of our hands, and turn us into a *church* –a place where the love of God lives in our life together.

May God give us the grace to give up on do-it-yourself and give in to all God knows we can be.

Plymouth Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
4126 Ingersoll Avenue  
Des Moines, Iowa 50312  
Phone: (515) 255-3149 Fax: (515) 255-8667  
E-mail: [mmardis-lecroy@plymouthchurch.com](mailto:mmardis-lecroy@plymouthchurch.com)

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> If one wanted to quibble—and who doesn't?—one might note that in John's Gospel Jesus sometimes speaks of a "commandment" that he has received "from his Father" (e.g., 10:18, 12:49). What I mean to say here is that Jesus only ever issues one commandment to his followers –the commandment that they love each other, found in John 13:34-35.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note—although it falls beyond the scope of this sermon—that the Christian's love for Jesus is a rare theme in the New Testament, which speaks more often of "believing in" Jesus than "loving" Jesus. John's Gospel is, in this case, delightfully idiosyncratic. Raymond E. Brown. *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation and Note*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), pp.637-647.

<sup>3</sup> The exact definition of *parakleitos* –rendered "Advocate" in the NRSV- is a thorny question. The word has connotations of advocacy, counseling, and comforting, but the most basic idea is "helper." To my ears, "Advocate" doesn't quite cut it –it sounds as if God were sending in a team of lawyers! Since the term has such a broad range of meanings that inevitably get reduced by the necessity of selecting any one word in English, it may be best to leave it untranslated. See the discussion in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Volume V. Gerhard Friedrich, Editor. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp.800-814.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Burrige rightly observes that the word "keep" in verse 15—*tērēsete*—could be read, not as an imperative, which leads us into legalism ("If you love me, you will keep my commandments...or else"), but as a future indicative and thus a divine guarantee ("If you love me, you will keep my commandments...eventually"). The latter understanding seems more in keeping with the promissory nature of the passage. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts*. The Third Readings: The Gospels. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), pp.555-558.

<sup>5</sup> John 1:14

<sup>6</sup> Credit where credit is due: David Ruhe brought up the church motto at staff Bible study on Tuesday afternoon, and I thought he was on to something.