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## **Spiritual Grounding**

1 Corinthians 3:11

Edward Searcy has described the difficult spiritual journey of the congregation in Vancouver, Canada that he serves as pastor. Twenty-five years ago this congregation decided that it could no longer afford to maintain the building that it constructed during the church boom years of the 1950s. So the church decided to sell its building and rent a chapel for Sunday morning services. With this decision the congregation's identity as a specific place in a particular neighborhood died. In the years since giving up the building the congregation has come to see itself in a very different way.

Searcy describes what he has learned on this spiritual journey in these words:

I am not sure when or how it happened, but somewhere along the line going to church on Sunday became more like attending a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous than, well, going to church...At every gathering there are men and women seeking sobriety from the addiction to have and to consume and to control the outcome of life. I count myself among them. For us the church is no longer a location; it is a movement...We share a common struggle to choose...God's way of neighbor love (*Christian Century*, February 8, 2011, page 20).

Leaving the building behind has forced these church members to recognize that they are spiritually grounded to a community that is all about grace.

This understanding of church is at the heart of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the fifth chapter of Matthew. Jesus uses this sermon to open up what it means to be part of the kingdom of God. The sermon is directed to the disciples who are gathered to listen to him. But he is also speaking to the crowd. He is offering a new vision of the grace of God to those who are wondering if they, too, might become disciples. Jesus invites his listeners to understand discipleship as being grounded to a community that is all about grace.

Jesus points to the inadequacy of the popular interpretation of the Ten Commandments. Those who see the commandments as no more than a set of rules to be followed have missed the point entirely. The purpose of the commandments is to establish one's relationship to a community that lives by grace. To be spiritually grounded in such a community empowers us to let go of everything that gets in the way of our relationships with others. Jesus says it like this:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder,' and 'Whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire (Matthew 5:21-22).

Jesus envisions a community in which it is not enough to be able to say, "I have not committed murder." Those who live by grace adhere to a much higher standard. They understand the destructive power of the language of hatred and division. They practice the language of gratitude and respect.

Last week I spent some time in the Carolinas tracking my Scots Irish ancestors. One of the archives that I visited is housed in a historical museum in the small town of Winnsboro, South Carolina. When I arrived in the town I found the 1850s-era building where the archive is housed. It is a pretty good archive, but it is managed in a very unusual way. Before I went I had been told that I should speak to the director of the museum, a woman named Pelham Lyles. I recognized the unusual nature of this place when I stepped through its front door and Pelham's voice rang out from the second floor inviting me to come up. When I told her the family names I was investigating she went to work looking for material.

For the five hours I was there Pelham was fully engaged in helping me except when she was interrupted. She was interrupted a lot. There were phone calls from her teenage daughters. There was a volunteer renovation crew marching in and out of the building and Pelham was directing their work. At one point the crew needed help with some heavy lifting and Pelham drafted me saying, "It is all hands on deck around here." Then there was the volunteer who came in to clean the bathroom which was conveniently located in the basement. The volunteer brought her four year old grandchild and Pelham had to entertain the child so the grandmother could work. Then came the phone call announcing that a volunteer archivist was on his way. Pelham warned me that he would probably pepper me with questions. Then she said, "I know he's cantankerous, but he loves genealogy." When she was not interrupted she was really focused on my research and not deterred by the fact that the computers were always breaking down.

Somehow or other I did manage to find some interesting material. When it was time to leave, I asked Pelham what I owed for the documents I had copied and the historical map I wanted to purchase. She said, "You don't owe us anything." When I pointed out that the map had a \$3 price tag on it she replied, "We wish we could sell that map for \$3, but no one has ever bought one. The best we have been able to do is give a few of them away." In the end I insisted on leaving a \$10 donation and she seemed quite happy.

The archive of Winnsboro was unlike any public institution I have ever visited. It is not grounded in anyone's concept of a well-run library, museum, or non-profit agency. It is grounded in the family relationships of that small town. It is part of the glue that holds the town together. Pelham's number one job is to make sure that everyone is treated with respect. For one day I was the stranger they were gracious enough to let in. The foundation of that unusual institution is firmly established and no one can lay another one.

This is the point that Paul made when he wrote to the Corinthian church. This church is torn by divisions. Factions are undermining the ministry of the church. Different leaders are competing for influence. Paul wants the Corinthians to pay more attention to their spiritual grounding which is so much stronger than anything that divides them. Paul calls the Corinthians and us to recognize the foundation on which the church is built. That foundation is Jesus Christ who teaches us to be a community that is all about grace.