

11/19/2017 ~ Proper 28 ~ Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time ~ Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Psalm 90:1-8, (9-11), 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30.

### **Support**

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as, indeed, you are already doing.”  
— 1 Thessalonians 5:11.

Twice in the last several weeks something has happened which triggered memories of my days in High School, sometime before the dinosaurs roamed the planet. The Public High School from which I graduated— Richmond Hill High School whose proud alumni, besides your truly include Hall of Fame Broadcaster and former New York Yankee Shortstop Phil Rizzuto, comedian Rodney Dangerfield and singer-song writer Cindy Lauper— Richmond Hill High School was and still is a large inner city school.

Now, I always say my graduating class numbered 800. The actual, precise number was 792— close enough.

I was reminded of that large graduating class number because Bonnie and I went to see *The Lion King* at the Landmark Theater in Syracuse. That was the first time we had been in that space. It seats 2,900 people.

It was once a movie palace, a part of the Loew’s Theater Chain. It opened on February the 18, 1928 and was known as *The Loew’s State Theater*.

Being in that space both gave me goose bumps and immediately projected me back to my High School Graduation. You see, my High School graduating venue was *The Loew’s Valencia Theater*, a movie palace which opened on January the 12, 1929.

I am sure there were some exceptions to this but generally each student was allotted 2 tickets to the graduation. Why? You do the math. A graduating class of 800 times 3— most students had at least two parental units and, as you know, that’s sometimes more— 800 times 3 brings the number up to 2,400 before you account for teachers and staff, etc., etc. You need a large space and there is not a lot of room for extras.

At that graduation I was one of a couple dozen students who sat on the stage. And we, the ones on stage, were the only ones who got to march anywhere. We were, ceremonially at least, the ones who walked across the stage and got folders which looked like diplomas. But on that day no one actually received diplomas. They were mailed.

And why was I among the few who sat on the stage? Anyone who received some kind of

separate award was on the stage. And the teachers in the music department had decided I was to be the one who would get the Music Department award.

The obvious question becomes ‘why was I getting that award since I will be the first to tell you I was not the most talented musician in that High School class?’ Well, there were two administrative reasons and only one music reason.

First, the music reason: the Senior Class musical that year was *The Music Man*. If you know the show you know a Barber Shop Quartet is an integral piece of the play.

Well how does a High School in 1965 staff a Barber Shop Quartet? I recruited three guys who did “Doo-wop” in the stairwells. They hung out in the stairwells so they could hear themselves better, hear the reverb, when they did their close harmonies. “Doo-wop”— remember, the dinosaurs were still alive. O.K.? All right.

I taught these guys the melodies to the several pieces the quartet sings. They supplied their own harmonies and I put in and sang a bass part underneath what they did. It sounded great.

The administrative reasons? I was the secretary for the chorus, the one who kept track of all the music, which much appreciated by every last music teacher.

And this school had a dance band. So I also had the title “Dance Band Manager.” What did that mean? It was essentially the same job— keep track of the music— but I had to keep track to two other items: band equipment and trumpet players. Have you ever tried to keep track of trumpet players? That is not easy! (Sorry: music joke.)

But let me talk about that Dance Band. For me one of the great experiences of High School was I got to just sit among these musicians as they rehearsed. And when they preformed I was stationed right next to them. I loved it.

And so, having mentioned that I visited the Landmark Theater which catapulted me into the past, something happened last Tuesday which got me right back to the past yet again. What happened last Tuesday? In case you have not heard, the Mid-York Concert Band will have its annual Christmas concert on December the 12<sup>th</sup> and I will be narrating *'Twas the Night Before Christmas* with the band.

Hence, last Tuesday I had the privileged of sitting with the Mid-York Concert Band as they rehearsed. Not only did I love just sitting there. I was once again transported back to those days of yesteryear when I got to sit with the Richmond Hill High School Dance Band. (Slight pause.)

These words are recorded in 1 Thessalonians: “Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as, indeed, you are already doing.” (Slight pause.)

I may not have been the best musician in my High School graduating class but, as most of you know, I am a member of A.S.C.A.P., the American Society of Composers Authors and Publishers. I was a member of the A.S.C.A.P. Musical Comedy Workshop, an invitation only, master class for librettists, lyricists and composers.

Among those who visit from time to time to offer counsel is the famous composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim. Once when Steve was visiting, another composer/lyricist team presented a work. Steve had high praise for the piece.

After we all discussed it for about 20 minutes he walked over to the piano and said, “As you get to the 16<sup>th</sup> bar in that song, did you every think about exploring a progression which might go in this direction?” Steve then played four or five chords.

For me the most amazing thing Sondheim did was he did not criticize, did not discourage, did not reprimand, did not disapprove, did not chastize and, perhaps most important of all, did not egocentrically say, “I am the greatest writer of musicals alive and— take my word for it— this is the way you need to write this song.” No. What did Sondheim do? He simply made a suggestion that these writers might explore something. (Slight pause.)

1 Thessalonians charges us to encourage one another and build up each other. 1 Thessalonians challenges us to help one another explore.

I suspect encouraging one another and building up each other up is getting hard in our society. The society seems to be concentrating as much on anger, on separation, on division as on working with one another, exploring in productive ways. Confronting with and in anger rather than confronting with and in love seems to be today’s by-law, today’s by-word.

To be clear, there *are* terrible wrongs, grievous offenses, one person against another, which need to be made right. However, part of my point is to ask how these wrongs, how these offenses happened in the first place?

We should never break covenant with one another. But we do. And since we do, terrible things happen, terrible wrongs happen that should never, ever have happened.

And perhaps some of the reason these wrongs against one another do happen is that we have forgotten that chords— that is not cords as in ropes but chords as in harmonies— we have forgotten that chords, bonds of mutual affection, are a necessary part of the Christian life. And yes, we do all need to work with one another, build up one another, support one another all the time. (Slight pause.)

Let me say something about what I’ve just labeled as chords— c-h-o-r-d-s— chords of affection. As a songwriter, as a lyricist, the most integral part of the song for me is not the melody but the chord structure.

You see, when you create a lyric to match a melody, the rules are obvious and fairly simple. For instance, generally one needs to try to place vowels on ascending notes. (You really do not want to hear a soloist hitting a high note on a consonant— a ‘k’ or a ‘c!’ That would be really harsh!)

Chords, however, chords inform me, the lyricist and you the listener, about the breadth and the depth, even the subtlety of the emotion the song is striving to convey. And chords, obviously, are made up of pieces, individual notes which rely on one another to convey the impact of the emotion, the effect of what is being said. Therefore, and I hope this is obvious, chords are individual notes which work with one another, build up one another, support one another.

And that, my friends, defines Christian community. We need to work with one another, build up one another, support one another. That image needs to be us— our image— an image of working together.

To be clear, I think we have great opportunity to do that daily. To be clear, we shall have great opportunity to do that in this coming week with the Thanksgiving Baskets.

And so once again, let me reiterate the way the Apostle Paul puts it: “Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other...” Amen.

11/19/2017

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “This afternoon I shall be preaching at the installation of a new Pastor, Allen Armstrong, at the Sherburne United Church of Christ. Toward the end of my comments I will say something I’ve said here many times. I shall quote the closing words of the American Declaration of Independence. Quote:) ‘...for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.’ If that does not describe encouraging one another and building up each other in an ultimate way, I do not know what does.”

BENEDICTION: A kind and just God sends us out into the world as bearers of truth which surpasses our understanding. God watches over those who respond in love. So, let us love God so much, that we love nothing else too much. Let us be in awe of no one else and nothing else because we are so in awe of God. Amen.