**Soft Verbs**

*Rev. John Allen*

The bylaws that govern the United Church of Christ —our denomination— begin like this:

“We acknowledge Jesus Christ as the one true head of the church.”

Which is a very nice way of saying something much simpler. And a bit scarier.

Nobody is in charge.

There are no orders coming down from the top. No rulings. No decrees.

Each church votes to choose its own pastor.

Each church member is afforded the freedom of their conscience in terms of what they believe, and how they practice their faith.

There are no creeds. No tests.

But there are still some higher ups, leaders who work in the national offices in Cleveland, and in the State offices in Framingham.

Again, no commands. no orders. Rather they make suggestions and recommendations.

Sometimes, in dire situations, the denomination might *strongly encourage*. or even *urge*.

Wendy Vander Hart, who is our Associate Conference Minister, the denomination leader responsible for all the churches inside 128, as well as all they way up the North Shore, reports that she keeps a Thesaurus of what she calls “soft verbs” on her desk. Words like, suggest, recommend, encourage, urge.

I can’t tell if she’s kidding. I can see how it would be helpful. Communication from the denomination often begins…

We propose..

We appeal…

We suggest…

We advise…

Soft verbs.

And today’s scripture reading can give us another one. Provoke.

Paul writes to the church, “let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds.”

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Now provoke may not sound like too soft of a verb.

I mostly associate the word with the not-so-soft decree from my parents, “stop provoking your brother!”

But just like suggesting and inspiring, when we provoke someone we are not determining the outcome in advance, we are merely seeking to influence a behavior or inspire an outcome.

We often use this word in a negative sense. We talk about how people have been provoked to anger. Provoked to violence.

But, along with Paul, let us consider how to provoke one another to love.

Fifteen years ago today, on September 11, in the midst of the worst terrorist attack in US history, hundreds of planes were diverted away from United States because the nation’s entire airspace was closed.

Some flights returned to their points of origin, others made emergency landings at nearby airports.

During that unprecedented ground stop, 53 planes carrying 6,579 passengers, from all around the world, ended up in the small town of Gander Newfoundland. With a Population: 10,400 with only 550 hotel rooms.

Over the next few days, while these passengers were stranded. The community closed all of its High Schools to form emergency shelters.

People volunteered to cook meals, do laundry, and set up cots.

Elderly and pregnant passengers were welcomed as guests in private homes.

A few locals who owned boats circulated sign up sheets for folks to go on excursions, if they wanted to get out during the day and explore the area.

The local bakery operated 24/7 making bread.

The most amazing thing about this story is that no one was in charge. Nearly every passengers account of the hospitality in Gander remarks in amazement that there was no agency or organization that seemed to be in charge, and yet every need was met, and then some, by the community’s hospitable impulse.

And if I had to guess, I bet that there were not too many orders given. Not to many commands.

I bet that it just started with a few people who thought, “let’s see what we can do.” And they brought some spare blankets down to the school.

Which led another person to think, you know, we have a spare room upstairs. And don’t you as well?

I’ll call our friend down at the bakery to see about getting some bread.

And little by little. Person to person. This tiny community provoked itself into an act of extraordinary love.

They invited each other to be a part of it.

The act of providing hospitably became irresistible, people wanted to be a part of it.

They heard their neighbors stories and thought, “I could do that too.”

They got creative and imaginative thinking of every way that they could fill those terrible days of violence, and terror, with love, with a feeling of safety, and comfort, and home…

And I am not sure that anything quite so beautiful would have happened if the whole situation had been subject to command and control.

Sure people would have been sheltered and fed. But the excursions, and the home-stays, and the fresh baked bread, those are the kind of things that could have only begun with soft verbs. The kinds of things that are beyond the imagination of simple directives.

Growing up in our church of soft verbs. Of suggesting, and urging, and encouraging, and provoking, I have come to believe that soft verbs actually stronger than commands because when someone gives a command the possible outcome is limited by what they can image.

Yet, when we invite and inspire one another, we can kindle futures that are beyond our imagining.

The Apostle Paul was no stranger to telling people what to do. He gave commands all the time.

But in this instance he recognized a simple truth. You cannot command people to act with love.

So, Paul says, let us consider how to provoke one another to love.

And then, he continues.

“And do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some”

That is to say, “keep showing up to be together.”

Now I understand that the Summer weather nice, and the beaches are calling. And its the right time for a family vacation.

And its not a crime to miss church a few weeks in the Summer. I did too.

But it is good to have you back.

And it is good to be back together.

And I don’t just mean that in the cordial sense It is really good to be back together. Because, It matters that we gather together regularly. It mattered to that early church that Paul was writing to, and it matters to us.

And the reason is because this is the place were we, overtime, can provoke one another toward greater love. Where we can inspire one another to more faithful lives. Where we can tell each other the stories of our faith. Where we can commit together to our vision for the peaceful and just world that God desires, and we can encourage one another and inspire one another to find our part in making it so.

I pray that we never face a crisis again like the one that we lived through 15 years ago today.

But there are other crises that are just as real in our community and in our world today. There is pain and fear and terror that is just as strong.

There is suffering just as profound.

Loss just as deep.

Fear just as powerful.

And church is the place where we get to see our neighbor bake some bread, and our friend start setting up the cot, it is the place where we are inspired, even provoked by one another to find our small part to play in healing the world with love.

Consider that each thing that we do together here at the church, even if it seems small and routine, is also kindling something beyond what we could imagine.

Like when you offer to pray for someone. It is not only a gesture of affection, but a proclamation of our faith that God has not abandoned them.

Or say you sign up to serve coffee hour. You are not just filling in a job that someone has to do. You are embodying hospitality so that everyone who walks through these doors knows that there is a place for them.

Of if you were to sing a hymn with all your heart you would not just proclaim the hope that you carry, you would be a part of creating the beauty that enlivens the faith of the person sitting beside you.

Showing up to church is not just about recharging your individual spiritual batteries. It is about charging each other up too. And helping create the space where all of us awake to God’s love and be provoked to faithful lives.

That is the beauty of a community like this one.

Nobody is really in charge.

And nobody is going to make anyone do anything. Nobody is going to force anyone to believe something. Nobody is going to enforce a creed. Or kick out a sinner.

But that doesn't mean we are passive. It doesn’t mean we do nothing. We are not idle. Or aimless.

We provoke, and inspire, and challenge, and encourage.

We enflame, and awaken, and kindle, and invite.

Our ministry is carried forward with all those soft verbs.

Which is a good thing, because then, there are possibilities beyond what we could even imagine.