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CUSP OF A NEW WAVE
Jan 31, 2021 Epiphany 4B
Psalm 111, Mark 1: 21-28

My thoughts this week have centered around the state of the Capital-C Church, ie the current universal church in our country and around the world. We the Church are confused as to who and what we are, and we give out almost conflicting messages about Christ's call. We are unfortunately part of the polarized problem in this country, and not loving one another - the higher arc of following Christ together disappears under political positions; the higher call to serve the needy is overwhelmed by whether one is red or blue. It concerns me that those folks who tried to storm our nation's capital (on Jan 6) carried the cross of Christ right next to the Civil War battle flag, and wearing tee shirts about Auschwitz - a clear contradiction of the values of Christianity. It concerns me that they would pray before letting out violent words and actions. It aligns the name of Christ with a certain point of view and hinders the words spoken for Christ that call for justice and peace.

I'm also concerned because so many believing congregations across our country are shrinking, graying, some closing and others fearful of closing; and yet we all just keep doing the 'same old same old,' and hoping people will somehow migrate back. Notice that I draw a difference between the gospel of Christ that we believe, and the way the church as an institution has practiced these beliefs. The church, as capital-C Church, cannot die - Christ is its head, and lives now and forever. Our faith and experiences of God continue as the Spirit continues to work and God continues to speak. How we live out our calling, the things we emphasize, the insights God gives - these can change.

The core of our Christian faith is about resurrection, new creation, new life, and transformation into the image of Christ. In our faith, death is never the last word. Symbolisms of transformation and new life are all over the Christian faith. In our communion sacrament, grain is crushed & cooked, to be transformed into bread that feeds us. Grapes are crushed and fermented, transformed into wine that we can drink. We use them to tell us that Christ was bruised and killed, then raised from the dead by God in a new form of life.

However, we must notice something - the old form dies before the new comes....the old forms go through a transformation that changes them irrevocably before they are usable for nourishment. Like seeds, as Paul reminds us in his great teachings on death, which fall into the ground & die...then new life grows from it.

So I am suggesting today that perhaps what we are seeing around us in these shrinking and closing churches is actually a dying of the way we perceived church to be, or how we “did” church. Just maybe, as in other aspects of our faith, this time is preparing this generation for a new understanding of faith and church, and a new witness to our God is being birthed. Maybe the way we’ve done church is over; & like the grain, the grapes & the seeds, it has to be transformed. Perhaps that is a more faithful way to look at what is happening around us. Certainly it’s a more hopeful way of looking at things, and certainly it gives us a call and a job to do as we watch and listen for the working of the Spirit. Like our Sailboat Church imagery, we are sailors trimming our sails to the winds of the Spirit. Let go of the sense of failure and worry - and instead take as our current purpose the openness to God doing a new thing in us, and a sense of adventure leading into the next chapter.

I think I’ve already told you all about an experience I had back in Virginia, when I attended the closing service at a church which had been a large influence in the presbytery. As the area around it became an industrial and manufacturing area, the neighborhoods moved outwards to the new suburbs. A small number of people who drove back into the area each week realized that it was time to formally close, and move their energy to other congregations. In their heyday they had helped plant new churches in the suburbs, and at their closing they willed their communion sets to one new church, sold their organ to another, and any monies left went to a fund for new church development. They looked to bless a future in other places. I admired that spirit.

The day of that last worship service, I walked around the gracious old building, running my hands along the wainscoting and peering into the formal parlor, seeing the library still filled with items from the past. I felt in my heart, I KNEW in my heart, that this model of church was passing - not just this building right now, but the whole era of the post World War II way of church that I’d been raised in. But what was the incoming model? What was the future to look like? I realized I didn’t have a clue. I remembered the Jewish people who fled Egypt under Moses, who then wandered around in the desert until the next generation of children, those not born in slavery, became adults; it was that new generation that wrote the next chapter. Moses himself was allowed to see into the land, but told that he would die before. I wondered if it would take until pastors raised in the older form of doing church retired, and the next generation of young pastors found their voice and vision for Christ’s church, bringing a fresh way to be that body of Christ. I wondered if I would see it.

The Spirit said to me that day that if I couldn’t see the next steps, I COULD watch for signs of it and be a bridge... instead of growing old and crusty and set in my ways and

condemning all change, I could instead be aware of new energy, new winds from the Spirit, new voices speaking to the church, I could listen for new voices and affirm them, offer them my support and what wisdom had been granted me. Maybe I could be like a midwife of sorts, in birthing the next era of God's church. That's what I've prayed for since then.

My entire ministry life has been with congregations that are graying, congregations with some younger families and children but not the way churches were full of young post-war families in the 50s and 60s. Raised in modernism but open to the postmodern, my ministry has been with churches on that cusp between the old and whatever new form is coming, on the rise of the wave rolling in. It pains me that most of the congregations were resistant, and refused to open their religious imaginations and seek God anew. Jesus talks about how you can't put new wine in old wineskins - evidently the old wineskins aren't flexible enough to contain the energy of the new wine, and so they burst. Spiritually, I believe that rekindling our relationship with God, re-reading the Scriptures with new eyes, listening to the nudges and murmurs of the Spirit, can make our souls into new wineskins, make us flexible and ready for new insights and new ways. We become sturdy enough in our faith and our love for God that we can let some things go and embrace ways that meet new needs. Our spiritual sinews get stretched and strengthened to hear new ideas and see the value.

That was my only intuition about the future - that to meet it, I needed to seek more authentic relationship with God - I needed to be honest before God in my fears, my angers, my desires, my frustrations - I needed to not fear the Spirit revealing my shortcomings and mistakes. I gotta admit that I usually tried to bring my best self to prayer, and try to summon up the highest attitudes. That had to go - God already knew better than what I was pretending.

Out of a renewed prayed life came a re-hearing of Scripture, because the Spirit was nudging me into some new reflections. I responded to the Scriptures with that more authentic self, and wrestled with things I had trouble with or didn't like. I started reading some different authors, and began to hear different things in the Word. As someone put it, instead of me reading the scriptures, the scriptures began to read me. I had some of those aha! moments where I had to repent and change, with God's help.

I began to preach to my congregations that the way into a new future is to rediscover God, and let the Spirit lead us into some new paths. Although there were always a few who responded and were glad to hear my message, most folks were happy where they were and just wanted more people to come - but nothing else to change. The status quo is resistant - until it doesn't work any more, and things hit a crisis point.

It seems to me that the Capital-C church is at that crisis point.

So this is my invitation to us here at Jamesville - the future is coming, and it will be different from the past in many ways. These next generations experience different things than we did, and live in a different world than we did. Most of us here grew up in the culture of modernism, and don't understand the postmodern culture and its way of being. What we are used to works for us - but it obviously isn't relevant or meaningful to many today, because they aren't here. We haven't communicated the gospel in ways that they can hear. It's not that the gospel is irrelevant - it's just that the way we've traditionally lived it isn't communicating the truths still there in it.

We are the elders, the ones who have lived longer and seen changes. Rather than be stuck in the ways we knew, part of being good elders is to assist those coming along, to hear their voices and value them, to learn how they think, and learn to communicate. We can use our wisdom to keep what is vital and know what it's okay to let go. Our faith is deep and our love for God is still there, and we will be okay listening for the new word the Spirit is speaking. God speaks to every generation and every people; the records of the peoples in the Bible testify that faith is enduring through long centuries, different governments and cultures, in slavery and in freedom.

My challenge to us is to renew our experience of God in an authentic way, to reach beyond the doctrines and answers that we learned to quote, and to look beyond the organizational methods we used to use and the traditional mission activities we used to do. Instead of seeing the church as dying, let us remember that our faith is one where death happens - but is then transformed into something new, and accept the challenge of being on the cusp of the next wave. Our star words for this year were "re'-words - refresh, renew, rethink, reimagine - words for welcoming the future. May God grant that we become those flexible and resilient new wineskins, and let the Spirit fill us and guide us. AMEN.