

The Constant in Change (various scriptures)

If you were with us last week, you know I introduced the idea of church rehab as a process that would be helpful in finding our footing again as a congregation emerging from the suspension of church life as we knew it prior to the lockdown brought on by the COVID pandemic. I pictured us sitting in my backyard discussing these ideas in deep shade enjoying a beverage together. So today, with your beverage refreshed, I want to invite you back into that spot to take a deeper dive into that general idea—not to rehash last week’s thought, but to venture a bit further into some of its implications as we survey the changing landscape of church life.

You’ll recall from last time that we understood the church to be a community of people gathered around the person of Jesus Christ, who share the conviction that he is the Lord of creation, who unites us to the life of God, who revealed in flesh and blood the character of God, who further revealed the kind of life God envisioned for humanity created in God’s image, and who, by virtue of his indwelling spirit makes that manner of life possible for those who are determined to learn from him. We considered some of the ways that these life-ways were learned by his early followers and suggested that we might have to rethink some of the ways we do this to correspond more to the method Jesus relied upon. In practical terms this means we have to consider the kinds of settings that best convey the understanding Jesus had and that more effectively allow for the adoption of that life for present day learners. Along the way we hit on the idea that God’s goal for us through Jesus is to live a life of love, not just a way of expressing love for God, but more to the point, how to live a life of love in every aspect of our lives right now which we understood to be the essence of living in the kingdom of God.

But as we consider the state of the church—and here I’m speaking broadly about the church in general—we might not easily arrive at that conclusion. Furthermore, if we were to survey the general public asking for their impression of the church’s purpose, it’s doubtful we’d hear them say, “the church is comprised of persons learning to live a life of love based on the example and teaching of Jesus Christ.” In that regard we have an image problem that also requires rehabilitation. So, you might ask, how did we get to this place, and what might we hold fast in our minds as the means for rehabilitating our own understanding that will create a different impression in the public mind piquing their curiosity that might lead them into what God desires for all?

In terms of how we got here, seemingly so far removed from the picture of the early followers portrayed in the New Testament, let me begin by admitting that a lunch break spared you from a densely packed historical timeline. It’s a fascinating study, and if you’re inclined to consider it, I would suggest reading a book by Phyllis Tickle called, “The Great Emergence,” in which she makes the case that the church undergoes significant change about every 500 years give or take a century. These shifts occur when a number of factors combine to challenge the church’s self-understanding to the place where its present form at the time of the shift is no longer able to bear the weight of the changes pressing against it, and a new expression of the church emerges to carry on. She helpfully points out that the emerging form of church doesn’t replace the previous one—it exists simultaneous with it—but the previous form also adjusts in light of the emergence resulting in a glorious expansion of the church. To be fair, those living in the moment didn’t necessarily consider the expansion glorious—it was often tumultuous, but the perspective of history allows us to see a bigger picture from which we can learn as we now recognize that we’re in one of these shifts. Instead of viewing this as a threat, we can see it as an opportunity to welcome and assist the next great emergence. As we do this, we bear in mind that the Holy Spirit is orchestrating this shift—it’s not something we conceive of and set in motion, so our place is to discern the direction of the Spirit and follow that leading.

This is easier said than done. For example, on the face of it, garage sales are easy to do. They get tougher when your favorite chair is on the driveway with a tag on it. It took me a long time to part with my skis—my mind would say, “but you’re a skier, remember the thrill of racing down the slopes.” to which my body replied, “no, you were a skier, remember that your knees are shot, recall the pain of going up stairs for weeks after a long day of skiing.” I sold them for 10 bucks. That’s a bit like the church facing change—we remember the good stuff

that we want to hang onto, but then the Spirit reminds us that it's a new day, with new challenges, and the church has to be nimble enough to adjust, to flow into the great emergence, to expand into new forms that carry it into its next chapter. We touched a bit on forms last week, not that we settled it, but we began the conversation that seeds imagination for whatever lies ahead.

In our remaining time, I want to briefly touch on something that doesn't change in all of this—the dynamics that frame us. Regardless of forms, which evolve over time, these dynamics shape the church to be the instrument God uses to bring about the outcome projected in the pages of scripture. And in some ways, the recovery of these dynamics is perhaps part of the catalyst for the great shifts that regularly occur. When these dynamics are present, the church is able to be the place where spiritual formation takes place, where it clearly functions as a community of persons learning to live a life of love modeled on the life and teaching of Jesus.

Simply put, they are the dynamics of family that hold its members together. I hasten to add that any model has limitations, and this is true of families—even the best of them are imperfect, and some are beyond dysfunctional. Indeed some of what I'll suggest can be true of disastrous family circles because what I hope to describe is the soup that families swim in, and the dynamics are true for good or ill. As a family of faith in Christ, we're keen on obtaining the goodness of God that releases the aroma of grace drawing the hungry to the feast of joy. So as we touch on these dynamics, understand that these are what should be present, what should not change, indeed what we hold fast to during whatever changes occur.

The first dynamic of church as family is safety. A family is a place where its members feel safe from harm, protected from whatever they face elsewhere, and valued simply for the fact of who they are. It's to be a place of refuge shielding against physical and emotional harm. So the church is a place of welcome offering respite and relief to the ragged, the worn, the weary, and we bear in mind that outward appearances don't always reveal inner turmoil. As one put it, "we never know the secret pain people bear," hence Paul's insistence on kindness, compassion, and long-suffering. For people bearing pain are vulnerable. Healing occurs when trust is established, when they who suffer sense safety, where the cause of their pain won't be turned against them. Our aim is healing and life which shelters the broken.

Secondly, the church practices the dynamic of belonging. Paul gets at this in Romans 8 where he wrote, "those whom God called, these God also justified," meaning that God draws us in, God declares us sons and daughters in the family of Christ followers—we belong because God makes it so, and because we belong to God, Paul also says that we belong to one another—we are siblings in faith. The benefits of belonging are graciously extended to all within the family. Families practice this—its members can have diverse interests, different personalities, and while its members may feel out of sorts in a variety of settings, there is always one place in the world where they know they belong, and while they may sense rejection or distance elsewhere, they have an anchor in the world where they are accepted, where their well-being is unquestioned. Grace is to flow easily within the church, for all within are cherished by the Father of us all—there are no favorites in the family of faith, for we are all favored by the One in whom we are each justified.

The third dynamic we inherit through family is identity. We grow into a history that shapes our perspective, our self-understanding; we are absorbed into a particular identity that sets us apart, at least in terms of what is familiar and comfortable. My family has German heritage which influenced us though my folks had come to America and were proud US citizens. We ate a lot of German food—I hardly knew any other kind of cuisine existed. When a friend in high school once said they'd eaten Chinese for dinner, I thought, "isn't that illegal?" We spoke Germlish at home, where German phrases cropped up in the middle of sentences—we never missed a beat, but our friends were momentarily confused. You likely have similar history from your families of origin. In like fashion the church as family provides identity—whatever your background or heritage, in the church you are a child of God who is shaping you into the image of Jesus Christ. You become part of God's story, you grow into a history that shapes your perspective, your self-understanding—and there is no privileged hierarchy in the

family of faith, which Paul makes clear in Galatians 3, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave or free, nor is there male or female, for you are all one Christ Jesus in whom you are all children of God through faith...” Race, status, even gender are secondary to our primary identity as children of God being formed in the image of Christ. We value and stand with one another on that basis above all others.

The fourth dynamic we pick up in families is that of norms, in other words, this is how we roll—these are the ways we live, the things that govern our choices and actions. These are the limits that get tested when children enter their teens, when behaviors are compared to others in their peer group, when parents hear things like, “Well Fred’s parents are letting him do this or go there,” and they have to reply, “That may be what it’s like in Fred’s family, but that’s not how we do things.” I’ve always been amazed at the resilience of foster kids, particularly older ones who’ve been through a few different family placements seeking adoption. They have to figure out how this family functions, they have to determine the norms in every new setting. Imagine the built-in anxiety they live with—did I get this right? is this acceptable? am I a good fit here? Imagine the kinds of adjustments they have to make in that process. It’s like this in the church as well. Coming to faith in Christ, being brought into the family of faith means acquiring the norms of following Christ. As we saw last week, the primary norm for Christ followers is to live a life of love, but it may take time to fully live into that particularly when life ways have been formed in a dog eat dog world, where looking out for number one is the underlying theme. This is where fellowship in the church becomes the laboratory for acquiring that skill, as Paul again points out in 1 Cor. 13 where he describes love as patience, kindness, a lack of envy, not boastful or arrogant, not dishonoring, not self-seeking, not easily angered, not keeping score of wrongs. This passage is often read at weddings, but Paul meant this as the standard for relationship among Christ followers. We learn how to do these things in our interactions with one another, and we do this within the circle of safety where grace abounds because we don’t always get it right, but we don’t give up, more importantly our siblings in faith don’t give up on us. We model this among ourselves, imperfectly to be sure, but we do it here, so that we can do it everywhere, for that’s the goal—to live a life of love.

Which leads to the final dynamic—at least for our time today—that of wholeness. The new testament calls this maturity where we live into a self-emptying life, we give of ourselves for the sake of others. We’re self-assured in our standing with God and we freely share who we are with all. This is what families strive for—that its members flourish in life, that they can stand on their own and make a difference in the world. This is the church at its best where we help each other get to that place of flourishing in every respect. It is a place of support that grounds us, provides assistance as it can, and encourages us to be all that God desires of us. And as that happens among us, we celebrate, and this is the basis for worship, not of the individual, but of the God who makes it possible. To God be the glory.

As we touched on last week, this life in Christ is a team effort. As each of us holds fast to these dynamics, pursuing them with the energy God provides by grace, we will, as Paul says in Ephesians 2, be joined together rising to become a holy temple in the Lord and become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Regardless of what changes lie before us, let this be constant among us. AMEN