

CCC
Rev. Dr. Curran Reichert
September 7, 2008

A Home Where All Belong

Ps 119:33-40

Teach me, O God, the way of your statutes,
and I will observe it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.
Lead me in the path of your commandments,
for I delight in it.
Turn my heart to your decrees,
and not to selfish gain.
Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
give me life in your ways.
Confirm to your servant your promise,
which is for those who fear you.
Turn away the disgrace that I dread,
for your ordinances are good.
See, I have longed for your precepts;
in your righteousness give me life.

In my newsletter article this month I asked what sounds like a straight-forward question: **Why be the church? Why does it matter?** This summer it dawned on me in a rather **sledge-hammery** way that this is the question at hand for me as a forty-year-old woman in ministry, and this is the question for **us** as we move forward together creating the church that is CCC. It is becoming clear to me that my generation of clergy feels the pressure of being responsible for the life or death of the progressive church as we know it, and that, in order to preserve its life, we must clearly understand and be able to articulate what about it is life-giving.

What we know to be true is that the generation that made the churches we grew up in what they were is passing from this earth;

those who ran the church bazaar year after year, who put on the Christmas pageants, sent out the birthday cards, and made luncheons for grieving families after funerals, those people are a dying breed, and the generation following them for the most part doesn't have a clue about what it takes to run the church of our childhoods. Church, for the most part, isn't even much a part of the next generation's vocabulary.

See, the church used to be the central gathering place in communities. Now we have community centers and book clubs, soccer teams, and food groups. The church is not the only option for coming together with one's community. The church used to be the place families sought counsel, and guidance on issues of morality and wholeness. Now, we have therapists and Oprah. The church used to be the place to turn to for weddings. Now, anyone can become ordained online for fifteen dollars, and officiate all the weddings they want. The church used to be a place people turned to when they were in need of things like shelter, food, clothes or emotional support, but somewhere along the way, even within the church world, it became unpopular to **need anything**, so now the church is the last place to know if a family is in trouble.

Make no doubt about it - this church, no church, will ever again be what it once was: 600 people, hundreds of youth, shuttling up and down the hill for three services a Sunday. It will never again be that, because the need is not the same. The people willing to shoulder the work are older now, and the next generation has loads of options for getting their needs met in places other than at a church.

And, besides that, the next generation is extremely cynical about organized religion. So, it will never be what it once was. It can, however, be something new, something meaningful, something lasting, but only if the generation that is **passing** and the generation that is **becoming** come to some sort of agreement and work together to foster the ongoing life and worth of the church. Our work is to figure out **together** what is worth preserving about CCC, what is worth handing down to the next generation concerning our faith. Our work is to consciously mentor future leaders and provide clarity about **why it matters to be the church.**

I should add that raising these questions does not actually come easily to me. I, like many others, might prefer to skate along with the usual bumps and blessings that make up community life, and not address the elephant in the room. I love my new office. I watch the deer come and go from the lawn. I enjoy the art work on the walls, and the pleasant exchanges I have with parishioners throughout the week. I love writing worship services and sermons. In short, I like it here - very much. But liking it here and wanting to stay employed in my little corner of heaven is not a good enough reason to settle for the middle ground. Settling for the middle ground assumes that we have time to waste, and that is a luxury none of us has.

You do know the middle ground to which I am referring, right? Middle ground are those congregations that really like each other, but can't seem to get beyond their own needs to make a difference in the world around them. Middle ground are those communities of the faithful who like each other and say they *want to grow*, but they really aren't

interested in making the adjustments it takes to welcome someone new. I am referring now to those middle ground churches who **can** afford to keep going for a decade or two, but, beyond preserving their own worshiping traditions, really serve no greater purpose. That's the middle ground church. And, because I cannot justify giving my life's work to that kind of church, and because I know for certain that is not the church CCC wishes to become, I...we... have no choice but to ask the questions that have the potential to cause unrest, questions like **Why be the church? Why now? Why does it matter?**

Since a sermon is just a starting place designed to generate further conversation, I will help get the conversation rolling by telling you why the church matters to me. In my experience, the church matters because the Good News of God's inclusive love for all people is nothing short of **salvific**. For someone to know that they are loved by God, when they believe they are completely unlovable by every human standard, is a message of hope that packs the power to keep someone alive. That is what I mean by **salvific**. God's love is salvific, the church is a manifestation of God's love, and that is why it matters to be the church.

Why now? Because for the three boys whose mother I buried this past Friday - who were baptized in this church but who have not been back in thirty years - for those boys to know that they would be met here with a welcome in their greatest time of need - that is why it matters that we are the United Church of Christ, **now**.

And when Sammy, one of our wisest elders, came through those doors to be at that memorial service because she had met those boys for the first time last Sunday and she wanted them to know they weren't alone, Sammy was the Community Congregational Church, and believe me it mattered!

*Teach me, O God, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.*

These are ancient words for sure. Scripture is certainly not a foolproof currency that helps us feel closer to God, but it is an important place to which we return when we face difficult questions like **Why be the church?** The Psalmist pleads with God to be **reminded of the path**, Jesus teaches the disciples over and over again to reach out to the outcast, feed the hungry, and visit the sick. We need to be reminded of the mandates placed on our hearts by God. We need to be the church rooted in scripture.

The stories of the Hebrew texts Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy remind us that communities have always had to work to understand their worth. They have always had to work together to create their stories and determine how to articulate who they are. What we are talking about this morning is not new, and what I am saying is not meant to be discouraging on this our first Sunday in September. It is meant to open the door to deep conversation about how CCC will relate to children and youth in the next decade, about how we will both hand off our traditions, and open ourselves to new growth.

The question is not *how do we become the church we once were*, but What is the church we are becoming? What are our core values? What are our goals? How do we articulate our faith in God? What is our relationship to Jesus and to the ancient scriptural texts? What do we want our children and grandchildren to know about God, Jesus, the Bible, community, justice and this body called church? Our children, your children, are not going to fall into the church by accident. Church in this day and age is a choice, and in Marin County it is a completely counter-cultural choice at that. We have to know why CCC matters enough to be able to encourage, dare I say implore, others to want to make that choice.

So I leave you with these questions, and I hope you will ponder them in your hearts in the weeks to come: What is God's Good News? What is the Good News according to CCC? and How do we live out that Good News in this community we call church?

Amen