

Dear friends:

I have been doing a lot of talking with our pastors and leaders in the United Church of Christ as well as in other denominations, mostly United Methodist, ELCA Lutherans and PCUSA Presbyterians. It seems that so many congregations are struggling and worried. Cultural shifts occur at lightning fast speeds, at least compared to past shifts. (That has many positives to it. The shift is very affirming of many values we hold dear, even if it may be scary as well.)

My reflection is that the mainline church is spending quite a bit of time in survival mode, chasing the money and making money and numbers the sole focus of health and well-being. And the money is important for mission, ministry, and programming. If money and numbers become the sole focus of health and well-being, however, then isn't that what the church becomes? Isn't it easy to fall back on what our culture defines as success: a "successful" church is one that can balance its budget and fill its pews? In the absence of another metric, it is understandable that those markers become the focus.

Yet, that focus runs counter to the Easter story. The early disciples and the early followers of the Way of Jesus were not a huge movement of people. They were scared out of their minds that the same terrifying fate that Jesus encountered would happen to them. But after receiving the Holy Spirit, they became on fire for God and for the mission and ministry that Jesus began. They gave their lives over to a mission and ministry.

God brings new life. But that new life can happen in almost imperceptible ways compared to the world's barometers of "success."

Sometimes, I think God can become an afterthought in a progressive Christian Church. We are different from the messengers of hate that often are the only public voice of Christianity. We understand the character of God and humanity differently. So we either keep quiet so as not to be confused with something hateful or because we hope our actions on behalf of the community will speak for us. Some of us may even expect God to bless us as because we are more open.

I think we, as a church community, should help define what those measures of “new life” should be. If we use the ancient wisdom of Scripture, how would we say that new life is either happening or not happening in our church? How are we living out our values as a church that values religious literacy, the gifts of other cultures and traditions, justice and peace, and being open and affirming to all? Are we being good neighbors? Do we speak and act with relevance? If those are not the questions for discernment, what should they be? And how do we make that resurrection narrative flow through our whole system as a local church community?

Just some things to ponder as our resurrection story moves into Spirit story. Please start a conversation and share your thoughts with me and others.

Peace,

Pastor Lynn