

From iChurch to Beloved Community
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October 15, 2012

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Are we a “me” church,
Or a “we” church?
That’s the challenge
Thrown down to all of us
earlier this year
By esteemed colleague
The Rev. Dr. Fred Muir of the Annapolis church.

Muir was the featured speaker
at this year’s Berry Street lecture,
at the annual conference of our denomination.
In his lecture, Muir challenges
that too many of our church activities
Are driven by “what’s in it for me?”
The future of our denomination,
He claims, rests in striking a better balance
Between the needs of individual members
And the greater good
of our congregational life together.

Now, it is one thing to celebrate
the importance of community in theory
and quite another to put
the love of the whole group into actual practice.
For some, it can be a challenge
Because first, some of us have to get over ourselves
And out of ourselves to see others.
I am putting myself in this category.

Here's why:
I live alone.
I've been divorced for more than a decade now,
And, as life would have it,
I ended up having no children.
I make my own decisions,
And pretty much do what I want,
When I want to,
As long as I meet my core responsibilities
for family, work and seminary.
It would seem very easy
To slip from being single to single-minded –
It's all about me, right?

Thankfully, no, it isn't all about me.
My daily spiritual practice helps to
Lift me out of myself,
To engage with the cares, concerns and needs of others.
In a way, you might say
my daily spiritual practice
Saves me from myself.

I begin each morning with contemplative prayer.
I hold family members in loving care,
And ask for healing, for health,
For happiness and wellbeing.
I hold friends and others who are struggling
With pain and loss in my heart,
Wishing them blessings, strength, peace,
and the knowledge they are not alone in their suffering.
I hold the pain of current events in loving embrace,
Holding out hope that increased understanding,
Forgiveness and healing may result from tragedy.

And I pray for myself: for strength,
For guidance, for the courage
to allow my heart to crack fully open,
because it is there, where our hearts break,
there, that we can do our best, most dedicated work
to help serve others and heal the world.

Now, I suspect there might be
Just a handful of you out there
a little uncomfortable
With the concept of prayer
As a way to open the door beyond oneself.
So let me offer a different story.

It was Christmas Eve 1968.
The Apollo 8 astronauts
broadcast live to television audiences around the world.
Hundreds of millions, if not billions
Watched and saw --
For the very first time --
What earth actually looked like from outer space.
We beheld that beautiful blue marble --
Our precious home --
Framed by the primordial darkness of space.
As we watched,
the astronauts took turns
reading from the Bible,
the first 10 verses of Genesis.

It was transcendent.
The ability to see our planet from
The perspective of deep space
changed our lives, forever.
There is a famous "earthrise" photo
Taken that night --
The colorful top half of the earth,
bathed in light,
Captured rising
above the moon's stark gray surface.

I have a copy of that photograph in my office
To remind me not only
of the vastness, majesty and fragile beauty of life,
but also to remind me
that I am a part of something
larger, and more ancient
than my mind can fully comprehend.
For me, the photo also helps
reframe the size of my particular problems
In the context of this larger perspective.

So what helps lift you out of yourself?
Helps you see yourself as part of something larger?
Helps you see the needs of others as well as your own?
Perhaps it's music? Poetry? Gazing up at stars?
Volunteer or social justice work?
Time with good friends? Family?

Often, our loved ones help the most
To broaden our perspective.
Many of you live
Surrounded by family --
Surrounded by a variety of voices,
Each expressing a different need.
These voices help call us out of ourselves
To consider needs other than our own.

It is a delicate dance, isn't it, to take those
Different voices into account
while charting the best course
to meet the needs for the greater good
of the entire family?

Are congregations really so different from families?
Here, we are surrounded
by a variety of individual voices,
Each expressing his or her needs,
some in concert with --
And some in conflict with --
the needs of the larger shared community.

Our friend Rev. Muir might say our challenge
Rests in our ability to get over ourselves
And out of ourselves --
Not to let self-absorption
Get in the way of what's best for the greater good.

He warns we've become the iChurch --
with the "i" standing for self-centered individualism.
Muir is not targeting a particular generation
when he uses the term "iChurch,"
but rather, he encourages
all ages to consider the many ways
we allow the needs and wants of an individual few
trump the needs of the entire group.

Our churches are self-governed.
Each congregation is an independent,
Stand-alone organization.
That means it is up to us to create
The community we want to have here.
Members covenant with one another –
We work together to create a set of promises, or pledges
About how we will treat one another
In our community life together.
Our reading this morning was the most recent covenant
Created by this congregation.

Muir believes we cannot do
both covenant AND individualism.
INDIVIDUALITY, yes, as we welcome and honor
diverse opinions, personalities, cultures,
socio-economic backgrounds, spiritual beliefs
and sexual orientations -- but INDIVIDUALISM
and its self-centeredness
at the expense of community?
No.

While rugged individualism
Has probably never caused problems
In THIS congregation,
I've seen first hand
where it has created problems
in other churches.

For example, consider the church
where people decide to attend Sunday worship
based on the sermon topic,
or the minister preaching,
rather than attending regularly
as an ongoing commitment
to the importance of being together
on Sunday mornings as gathered community.
Wouldn't that be similar to family members
deciding whether or not to show up for supper
Depending on the food being served --
When the point is not what we're having for dinner --
It's about spending time together as family?

And then there are those congregants who decide how much to pledge
 or alter their level of financial support
 based on “what’s in it for me?”
 rather than pledging for the
 long-term growth of the entire community?
 For example, some people decrease pledges
 Once their children reach college age
 And are no longer attending Religious Education classes at church.
 “We lowered our pledge,” they say,
 “Because we’re not using as many services at the church
 Now that the children are grown.”

Is membership in a church
 The same thing
 as membership at the local health club?
 Is this like saying we offer
 Silver, Gold and Platinum levels
 Of membership here?

What exactly would Silver, Gold and Platinum levels
 Of spiritual growth look like?
 At the Silver level of social justice,
 Do we just sign a petition,
 at the Gold level we go out and demonstrate,
 and at the Platinum level,
 we actually work
 to influence a change in legislation?

Consider the many people who attend
and participate in our churches
or our social justice activities
but never quite make the final commitment to join.
Or never quite get around to
Making a pledge to help support a church financially.

To that, let me say this.
I'm in my final year of seminary,
so it was only a few short years ago
When I was sitting in the pews
As an active member and lay leader.
I first came to this faith during a painful,
Messy divorce more than 15 years ago.
Church community brought me solace,
At a time when I needed it most.
It brought me new friends, and a place to
Heal my wounded spirit.
I suspect others in this room
Came first in pain and stayed for the love
And for the community they found here.

Someone's spirit in this room,
Needs hope, needs healing.
Perhaps someone sitting in front of you
Or behind you,
or alongside you in the very same row.

Someone's spirit needs comforting.
Someone's spirit needs strength
to let go of fears, to ask for help needed,
to trust that ultimately, all will be well.
Who knows? Maybe the spirit
That needs to be refreshed, re-invigorated
And renewed is your very own.

Church matters,
And is worthy of our best efforts
to support it,
Because each precious spirit
in this room matters.

I am reminded in moments like this
That I found this faith
Because it was created and sustained, in community,
by those who came before me.
I am comforted by these words by Rev. Peter Raible,
paraphrasing Deuteronomy 6: verses 10 through 12:
"We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.
We drink from wells we did not dig..."

YOU are a congregation that understands
the importance of generosity and legacy --
Here, you have a long history of supporting capital campaigns
To expand and build for future generations.

So how do we strike the appropriate levels of balance
Between the needs of individuals
and the needs of community?
Our friend Fred Muir, from Annapolis, asks us to return
to the concept of Beloved Community –
an understanding of self
within the context of community.

Because, let's face it.
Our understanding of the self
does not happen in a vacuum,
but within social contexts involving others – many others --
our family, the communities where we live and work,
our educational and religious institutions
and the broader culture around us.
It is within the context of community
that we are challenged, we learn,
we are formed, we are nourished,
and where we are held in love,
especially during the tougher times
that come into each of our lives.

Building effective community
in today's world might seem extremely difficult.
It often involves swimming upstream
against predominant culture.
As Americans, we are encouraged
to place immediate self-gratification –
the “I want what I want, and I want it now” attitude –
over such longer-term community-building values
as inclusiveness, patience, or self-sacrifice.

Beloved community begins with covenant.
How we choose to be together and treat one another.
Here, in this congregation,
As we heard earlier this morning,
we promise our goodwill and honest effort
to welcome all with acceptance and respect for differences.
Here, we promise to practice patience
and to speak truth to one another with compassion.
Here, we acknowledge that we may not always agree
With group decisions, but we promise to stay engaged –
We pledge to continue to support and to participate
In the decision-making processes.
And here, we understand that building beloved community
Requires patience, and practice.

May we never stop practicing
How best to be in loving, respectful relationship with ourselves
And with one another, in this place.

As a faith community steeped in the belief
that deeds take precedence over creeds,
may this house of worship also continue
to see and reach beyond the horizon
of our immediate individual lives
To engage with the larger human community.
When we expand our sense of beloved community,
We redefine whom we mean by “neighbor”
as we truly begin to love our neighbor as ourselves.
Amen. May it be so.