

The Future of Faith

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:23-27

I want to ask you about this church thing. Why do we do it? How do we know if we're doing it well? What is the future of the church?

Church is a gathering of people with something of a shared vision to make the world a better place -- more just, more compassionate, and more fun because of the belief that is how God intended it to be. There is a temptation to do church because we have always done church, because it is familiar or comfortable, because we like the music, are inspired by the worship, or enjoy the feeling of community. While these are all good things, they are good supplemental reasons for participating in church. In truth, we could find meet these needs elsewhere, as many do, and they are not adequate reasons for having church.

There is also a temptation to focus on building or growing the institutional church with more people, money, and programs. Having more of an institution with more people can be a very good way to touch, support, and teach more people. With additional resources, the church can support and teach more people. Yet, very quickly we can cross a line and begin to measure the success of the church by the number of people in the pew and number of dollars in the bank. Don't get me wrong, money can enhance greatly the ability to be church effectively. Noses and nickels are not the measure of success as church.

Some faith groups have a different priority. They focus on an exit strategy. Their goal is to leave this world for heaven – a perfect place elsewhere. Church is all about getting out of this corrupt and hopeless existence. But that is a fundamental misreading of the Bible and of Jesus. The image of “new heaven” and “new earth” is not about creating something else somewhere else, but about transforming the nature of what is here and how we live with each other on this earth.

The church exists to help mid-wife the creation of a new earth in partnership with the Holy Spirit and with all people through the practice of justice, peacemaking, compassion, community, and love. This was the vision Jesus shared in the Gospel of John as he considered the likelihood of his impending death for the cause of God's kingdom. He said, "Right now I am storm-tossed and what am I going to say? 'Father, get me out of this'? No, this is why I came in the first place." (John 12: 27-8) Jesus came and showed us the way to transform this world into the *Shalom* of God.

The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed essentially the same vision 500 years before Jesus. Jeremiah lived and taught at the onset of the Babylonian conquest of the nation of Judah, the destruction of Solomon's temple and of Jerusalem, leading to eighty years of exile. At this moment of deepest crisis, as they were facing non-existence as a nation and what they perceived as the defeat of their God Yahweh, Jeremiah articulated a reason for hope when he said, “the time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts and be their God.

And they will be my people. They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They'll know me firsthand.”

Jeremiah was speaking to the conflict within the Judaism in his day. His people believed they were God’s unique people and were called to share God’s blessing with the world. But they tended to believe that this blessing only come as people accepted their understanding and their religious perspective. Blessing was available, but only if you came to them.

Jeremiah’s radical new thought was this: it was not in others accepting our religion and our understanding of how a covenant relationship with God should be fulfilled. It is by the ones who had experienced God’s blessing and God’s presence recognizing the God-presence in others and affirming that the Spirit is active in many forms and by many names.

Jeremiah chose an inconvenient time to share his unpopular vision. It is hard enough to sell a new vision under the best of conditions, but in the middle of a major crisis? That’s just bad timing. I don’t know that today is any better a time to talk about a new vision for the church, but this is really that old vision of Jeremiah refocused through Jesus and many followers of Jesus for 2000 years. This is a vision if church not as religion police who condemn people for not believing the right doctrines or for practicing faith differently. This is not church as keepers of the only acceptable religion or church controlling access to God.

This is a vision of church learning to see that the law of God (i.e. loving God with all the heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loving neighbor as self) is already written into every life! This is a vision of church that is able to recognize and affirm God’s presence wherever it is found. Church exists to encourage people to call others, and ourselves, out of darkness and into the light of hope. Church is community to encourage each other to live fully, with compassion, and seeking peace, freedom, and justice for all people.

What is the goal we are aiming toward with church? Is it to preserve church with its comfortable and familiar practices? Or is church a means to the fulfillment of the dream of God – of *shalom*, oneness, connectedness, and harmony for all people, all creation, and all life?

The Christian church was born -- came into existence, grew, and developed -- after Jesus: after his death and after his resurrection. It started with the breath of the post-Easter Jesus breathed into the disciples filling them with the Holy Spirit. The Church started because of their experience of and belief in his resurrection. It continued because of their faith in Christ’s presence with them. It continued because of the truth of his message about the practice of continually dying and being reborn. It continues today because of the reality of the Spirit in the lives of people living in communities of the faithful.

The Church exists to support and prepare people to participate in the transformation of the world – on a journey toward a new heaven and new earth. Church exists so that we

can practice with each other placing ourselves in the flow of the Spirit. It exists for us to share that Spirit.

Church is bringing our questions and wisdom, and sharing both generously with each other. It is sharing the journey of discovering and living according to our own calling -- our individual and communal response to God's invitation. This is life's invitation to be ourselves in love with the possibility of who we can become.

This weekend, about forty people from Crossroads Church gathered for a direction-setting retreat. There was great energy and the sharing of ideas prompted by the moving of the Spirit. Many of the ideas began taking shape as workgroups for the coming church year. They are tangible expressions of how church is taking shape in our presence.

We call this church. Gathered or scattered, we seek to make God's dream of *Shalom* our very own. We respond to Jesus' invitation to participate with him in reconciling the world to God. This is our future faith and also our present church. On this journey, we discover that God's very nature is written not just into our hearts, but also into this community. We just might find, in the dreams and passions of our sisters and brothers, faith, that our own dreams can begin to come true in Jesus' name.