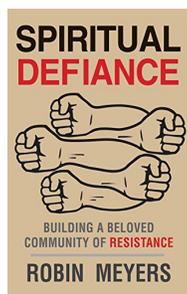


“So You Want to Be Religious”

Rev. David Gregory

January 27, 2019

Third Sunday after Epiphany



First reading

Robin Meyers in Spiritual Defiance: Building a Beloved Community of Resistance

When theological explanations of Jesus become more important than an experience of Jesus ... the church becomes an ecclesiastical house of cards. Once beliefs about Jesus have replaced the Jesus Ethic, we turn into a noisy, quarreling collection of fuming, red-faced, self-absorbed guardians of what some have judged to be infallible. The first casualty of this addiction to “sound doctrine” is the time, energy, and money it takes away from mission. When mission work is gone, church people just look like any other special interest group, raising money to engage in self-promotion. In fact, many Christians today appear to be absolutely indistinguishable from anyone else walking the streets—except that they are angry, nostalgic, fearful, and quick to judge what they do not understand.

Second reading

James 1:26-27 from The Message by Eugene Peterson

Anyone who sets himself up as “religious” by talking a good game is self-deceived. This kind of religion is hot air and only hot air. Real religion, the kind that passes muster before God the Father, is this: Reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption from the godless world.

As most of you know, today is a day in the life of the church when members and interested friends will gather after the service to give final approval to a budget for the coming year. This year as we do so, we are grateful for the increases in energy, participation and resources that we are experiencing here at Community Congregational Church.

Interim periods and pastoral transitions are opportunities for intense questions to be asked and hopefully answered. In 2016 and 2017, this was your story. You had two interim ministers during that time: one who moved you from your past, and one who catapulted you into the future.

There was a lot of conversation about vision, and quite frankly, the process did not produce a single vision statement that was embraced by the congregation as a whole. And that's really ok, since we are (you know) a congregational church. It's that independent, grassroots, even tenacious spirit that makes us who we are. Our system is not episcopal, with a bishop handing decisions down the line. Our government is not presbyterian, with a group of ordained elders determining which way we'll go. It's up to us. Right here, right now, in this room, to hopefully listen to the inner voice of spirit, to treat each other the way we want to be treated, to love one another as we love ourselves, and covenant with each other to move forward. Other forms of church government are more efficient at times, but none is as effective in involving the rank and file in the sacred work of discernment. It gets messy. Not everyone is happy all the time. But like members of a loving family who sometimes disagree, we find ways of accommodating one another out of love and respect, and out of a desire to make a difference in a world that desperately needs us to step up RIGHT NOW and show what we're made of.

At this time, we are part of a diverse religious landscape. It is true that a clear majority of Americans identify as Christian, but it isn't always clear what they mean by the word "Christian." And the total number of those identifying with some form of Christianity is declining. Most religious groups show a curve that is either flat or declining. But there is another religious group that is growing more rapidly than all the others. It is a group I like to call the "nones." These are the folks who if asked on a form to indicate their preference would check the box called "none." And those who identify as "nones" make up large swaths of younger populations who either question all religious teaching or don't like positions that churches take on social or political issues. The nones are growing exponentially, which explains (sort of) why the thirty-somethings are not exactly breaking the doors down to get in here.

It's not that they don't like us. It's not that they don't like our values. In fact, the majority of younger people in America do indeed share the values associated with progressive Christian denominations like the United Church of Christ. So if we're that progressive, that hip and that cool—OK maybe not so hip and cool, but definitely progressive in our aging Boomer kind of way—why wouldn't they put down their iPhones long enough to drive up this hill for an hour on Sunday? What is the absence of our children saying to us? By their absence our children are telling us that while they do indeed share our values, they don't necessarily need our institutions in order to practice them. The ethics of social justice do not require a religious root.

How religious are you? I'll be really honest and say I don't always know how religious I am. And when the preacher starts questioning his own religion, this must mean that we're going to hell in a handbasket. Right? With religion generally taking on negative connotations, what role does it play in the work that we are doing together at Community Congregational Church?

We have some very practical considerations in front of us today. We're going to be asking you to take a good hard look at the age and condition of this grandmother of a building that we're sitting in. She's aging and she's tired, but we love her and want her to be well. It will take some large sums of money to take this structure into some future form of ministry. Fifty years from

now this place might be a spiritual renewal or retreat center. It might be a larger nursery school. It might even be a church, but the last thing we want this place to become is a museum housing the memories of what once happened here. We are asking you to consider doing what is necessary to maintain this building, but the question we all need to ask ourselves is “Why?”

In 2015, I flew to Ohio for my high school class reunion—something I’ve rarely done. While I was there, our family home in Wilmington happened to be on the market. It was built by my great-grandparents when they got married in 1886, on a piece of property owned by my great great-grandparents before the Civil War. My sisters and I sold it in 1998 when my mother died and my dad went into a nursing home.

I knew every inch of that house. My youth was spent mowing the half-acre lawn. I painted it inside and out more than once. Every piece of furniture had a history that we knew. Family pictures adorned the walls, and the rooms echoed with generations of familiar voices. So in 2015 after it had been in someone else’s hands for seventeen years, I took the opportunity to go inside had have a look. The outside looked much the same. The front door was the same, but across the threshold it was an entirely different place. Stark white walls with beige carpet everywhere. Doors had disappeared and walls were moved. The bedroom that was my mother’s place of hospice is now a laundry room. The kitchen was unrecognizable. A hundred and twelve years of my family’s history was gone without a trace. It’s fine with me. I didn’t want that old house. It is serving another purpose now, for people I don’t know. I wish them well.

So what’s the point? There will come a day when there will be no trace of us in this place. Indeed, we need a new roof, and the heating systems are in trouble. Our bathrooms aren’t ADA compliant. Our beautiful property requires a lot of funds for upkeep. We’re going to do it. We’re going to take care of the place. We’re going to move forward. I only want you to consider one question. And the question is “Why?” Why do we care about this place? Do we see a dream for this congregation fifty years down the road? And if we do, what are we willing to let go of in order to allow that to happen? What is our mission? Let’s answer this together and answer it sooner rather than later. Amen.