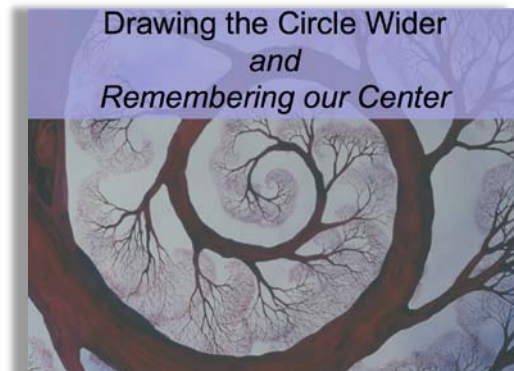


August 24, 2017

Draw the Circle Wider
Psalm 133

Remembering Our Center

*How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.~Psalm 133 NRSV*



There was a fascinating “discussion” on the United Methodist Clergy FaceBook page this weekend about what do you include in Usher and Greeter Training? How do you welcome people coming into church on Sunday? What works today in our context?

There were lots of funny stories, good ideas, and horrific tales:

- greet children on their own level
- let their parents know what is available for the children
- don't let early arrivers be alone in the sanctuary without greeting them
- when passing the peace don't get into conversations with those you know, ignoring the newcomers

We are being watched all the time by visitors, our youth, our children who ask themselves:

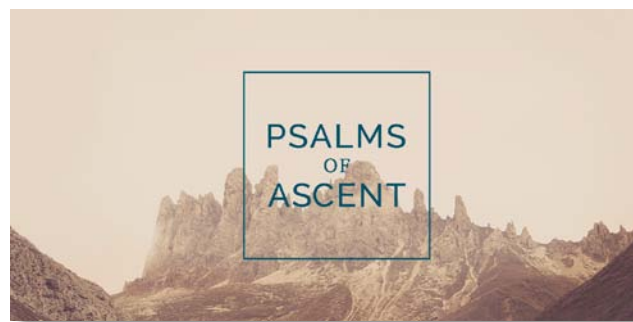
- ✓ Is this a church I could belong to?
- ✓ Is this a place that is safe for me?
- ✓ Is this a place that will bring me into their circle to experience *community*?

In our church today we have folks who have been part of this church all of their lives, some who have been members over 60 years, and those who have joined us in the last year. Do you remember when and why you joined this church? What impressed you? What made you stay?

Being church in 2017 is hard! It used to be people joined churches because of denominational loyalty, or they chose their neighborhood church. Things were predictable: there was one hymnal in the pew, and one accepted version of the Bible.

It's not the same any more. The church culture has changed... we are in uncharted territory.

But what is it that people notice?
Let's go back to our humble little psalm 133.
It's one of the shortest psalms, and is in the grouping of psalms called *psalms of ascent*: a song pilgrims to Jerusalem would sing as they climbed the hill to the Temple.



These pilgrims would travel together in family groups for days; sharing stories, memories, food, experiences... all the while anticipating the culmination of their journey: the Temple.

So it would be like our whole church taking a journey together, living together, sharing the same space, the same belongings, the same food, the same facilities... kind of like a mission trip! Now many of you have been on mission trips.. just as our youth returned yesterday from their Mission Trip to Seattle. And indeed on a mission trip you get to know each other in a different ways because you are working together, sleeping and eating together, hearing each other's stories, sharing the same experiences, bonding, and silliness!

I went on last year's mission trip to NE Washington to work on building a house for a woman whose house had been burned in the Complex Fire of 2015. It was such an all encompassing and memory making experience shared with 16 other people. And I know if our same group were to plan another mission trip, I would be the first to sign up. I would be anticipating the joy and experience, the making of memories. I would be singing my own psalm 133:

*How good and pleasant and fun
and rewarding it is...
to be with and work with and worship with
those brothers and sisters
in our mission group!*

So Psalm 133 is a Psalm of Ascents;
a song of *anticipation* of something *really good*
that's going to happen.

But it's also a song of identity:

- this is who we are
- this is who we are striving to be
- this is what is about to happen.



What would happen if every time we came to worship, or a committee meeting, or an InsideOut Sunday, we had our own *song of ascent*:

*How good and great and wonderful it is
to be this family of believers
who love God, love each other,
and love the community outside these doors!*

How would that change our attitude? Our mission? Our tasks at hand?

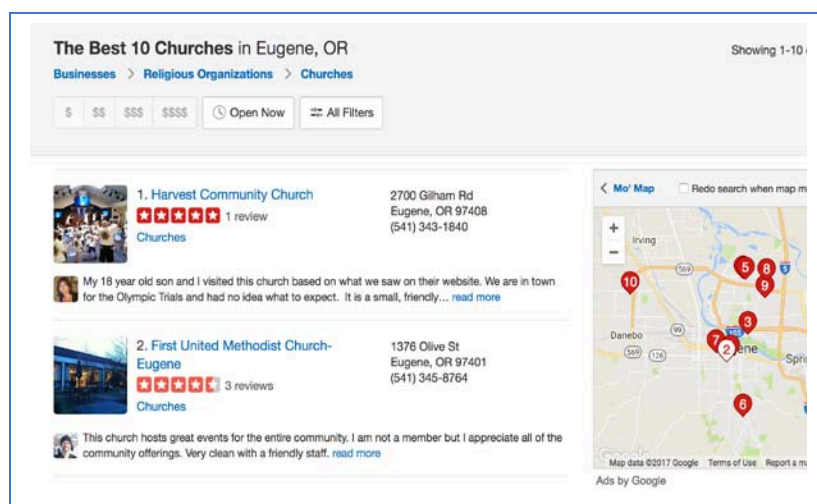
You see I think THIS is what folks pick up on when they walk into a church. Because it is what we all long for: a sense of belonging to a spiritual family that likes each other, and works together, and keeps the door open for new members of that family.

I thought I would Google how many churches are in Eugene because I know there are a lot of people have to choose from.. a lot!

But what caught my eye was the lead line from Yelp:

The 10 best churches in Eugene Or.

And to my surprise, our church is No. 2 !!!! (as of this month). Now that's based on just three reviews, that taken together average 4.5 stars out of 5



*How good and pleasant it is when
God's people dwell together... in unity/ harmony*

Harmony... we know that people today in our world and culture, are anything "but" harmonious. **Our World** continues with the haves and the have nots. Refugees languish for years in camps, while we close our hearts and borders. **This country** continues to divide deeply and vocally along lines we thought we'd moved beyond. **Our denomination** sees itself deeply divided and wonders if it can sustain two diametrically opposed views under one umbrella called the United Methodist Church. In this town of Eugene there are **two clergy associations**: one progressive and one evangelical, and never the twain meet.

In the midst of these great divides, can the church be a place of refuge? A laboratory for grace and *dwelling in harmony*?

Harmony: I do not believe that we have all agree with each other on all things, but in how we: treat each other...

in our need, in our vulnerable time
in our very different opinions
in honoring the Christ in me.. which ..
recognizes the Christ in you:

Namaste!

The words ***unity, harmony, all together*** are used in various translations of this psalm. These words do not mean an absence of differing opinions or even an absence of conflict. But there *is* the connotation that we *listen* to understand.. to see if there is a third way.

I think ***that*** is a **Psalm 133 church**....not where everyone agrees in lockstep, or agrees on a religious vocabulary. But rather a Psalm 133 church has an atmosphere where we give each other leeway and grace for differing opinions.

Let me tell you why I love this congregation... you ***brothers and sisters who dwell together:***

- You *do* treat each other with respect when things get tough or complicated. There is a willingness to work through things (maybe not right away, but eventually).
- You have been through a lot in your history: the good, the bad and the ugly. And still you are generous with: this facility, your time, your resources, your abilities, your caring your grace.
- **You take risks:**
 - You are a reconciling congregation
 - You are a sanctuary congregation
 - You open your doors each day to neighbors ...great and small
 - And you *take* church outside these walls!

And what are our areas for growth?

- We have some inner circles that need to be widened
- You yourselves have voiced that you long for better ***Connection:***
- How do we continue to challenge each other (and ask the question of how do we connect better and more deeply), to do that in everything we do: committees, worship, activities, missions?

In this church, I believe we focus on Wesley's admonition:

"If your heart is as my heart, give me your hand."

So here in this Psalm 133 church, there is no room for pettiness of:

- ✓ imposed dogma
- ✓ Simplistic religious language
- ✓ my way or I'm taking my toys home.

And this is not always easy in a church like ours where we are very diverse in age and theology and culture and background and life experience.

We have approaching the **Season of Creation** in three September Sundays. I have to tell you that five among you have worked very hard and thoughtfully and spiritually on these three worship services to share their passion and their fear at how God has given us such a treasured gift to enjoy and protect, and how we are not.



In some ways these services will be very be different:

- ✓ joyous yet challenging..
- ✓ a time to mourn and repent
- ✓ a time to see hope and God's heart
- ✓ we will be challenged, maybe shocked,
- ✓ maybe some buttons will be pushed.

But **liturgy** means "work of the people' .. **The people** .. in all their diversity. And that is what our worship should be here: *your work*...the Holy Spirit breathing through you to bring us God's word for our lives.. our fellowship.. our ministry.

* * *

Christians in the New Testament who worshiped together in one place were referred to as the **Body of Christ**. And that is what we are. And people see Jesus (or not) in how we act **together** (different skills, actions, moving together in one direction). It's the *how* we talk and walk and live day to day that demonstrates whether Jesus is either real or not here. It's asking that question: ***Are we being Jesus?***

As St. Francis wrote:

Always preach the gospel.. sometimes use words.

Yes! Here we intentionally draw our Circle Widerto include and embrace and grow and stretch and love and forgive. And at the center of that circle is the God who calls us to live *all together* as family.

***It's good, it's great, it's wonderful
when friends are friends
and family is family.
It's good, it's great, it's wonderful
when people get on well
and everyone belongs.***

***Living in unity,
enjoying each person,
sharing common ground –
this is God's precious gift,
like sweet rain after a hot day,
like laughter bubbling up,
like coming home.***

***God's life is life together.
God's blessing is love,
now and forever.~ Silvia Purdie***

Preached by the Rev .Pamela Nelson-Munson at Eugene's First United Methodist Church.

Two verses added to *Blessed Be the Tie that Binds*:

*We share each other's pain; our mutual burdens bear;
we work, we play, in loss or gain, we hold each other dear.*

*How wonderful it is to live as "one" in peace,
like precious oil that's meant to bless God's Church,
so struggles cease.*