

Church In Community

Luke 4:40-44

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn
September 19, 2021

When it comes to how you live your life, “Are you a reservoir? Are you a canal or a swamp?” That is the question asked by the great spiritual leader, Howard Thurman, in a short meditation included in his book, *Meditations of the Heart*. Thurman says that a person’s life - particularly how they use their resources and relate to God and to others - can take on the characteristics of a swamp, a reservoir, or a canal. A swamp, he says (and remember he was writing before we came to understand that a swamp is its own complex ecosystem), has an inlet but no outlet. So, it becomes a place where clutter gathers and living things decay and die. Meanwhile, a reservoir holds water so it is readily available for anyone who might need it. It also has a way for water to enter the reservoir and to leave it so that the water is regularly refreshed. Finally, a canal channels water out to where it is needed providing access to those who might not reach it easily.

So, which is true of you? Do you tend to always be gathering more belongings to you, hoarding them “just in case”, and isolating yourself from the people and world around you? Or are you a resource others can draw from during times of need, recognizing that you are a trustee caring for the gifts God has given you and prepared to both receive them and give them away. Or, finally, are you a canal? A channel that carries God’s gifts out into the world, connecting people with each other, and meeting people where they are?

As many of you know, I started a doctor of ministry program recently, and one of my professors, Dr. F. Douglas Powe Jr., has taken this idea from Thurman and applied it to churches. In his book *The Adept Church*, he observes that some churches are swamps, some are reservoirs, and some are canals. Last week, we began a sermon series entitled “Reimagining Church”, and I think this model might be helpful as we think about the next faithful steps God is calling our church to when so much has changed in the last eighteen months. Through the efforts of our Leadership Council, we’ve updated our church statement and identified three areas to work on in the coming year. One of these is building relationships and addressing the needs of our community - and that brings us back to swamps, reservoirs, and canals. Which one are we?

Powe says that most healthy, mainline Protestant churches like ours are reservoir churches. They have strong programs and a close community, excellent worship, ample resources, and a desire to use their resources to help others. They are also what are sometimes called attractional churches. They do what they do very well and anticipate that people will come to them because of all the good things they offer.

The problem is that the religious landscape in the U.S. has been changing in some significant ways. Where once going to church was something that was expected in our society, that isn’t true anymore. Fewer and fewer people in the United States see church as part of their lives or identify themselves with any one denomination. Yet, they still have a deep longing for connection with the divine and for a community of people who are growing and learning together. And the needs of the greater community, the community outside the church walls, are

profound - particularly right now in the midst of so much upheaval and uncertainty. So, what does that mean for us, for our church?

As is so often true, we can learn from the example of Jesus. Our scripture passage for today takes place in Jesus' ministry. He has just been baptized and spent forty days in the wilderness after which he went to his hometown, Nazareth, to teach and share his calling. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." After hearing his words, his friends and neighbors rejected him and drove him out of town, so he moved on to Capernaum where he began to teach and to heal. The people of Capernaum were amazed by his teaching and his healing. That's where we pick up the story in the verses for today. As word about Jesus spread, the people began to bring their friends and family members to be healed by him. All night long he healed people until, finally, at day break, he stepped away for some time alone. But then the people found him and begged him to stay there in Capernaum with them. But he says, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent. And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea."

Jesus knew that he was called to grow the kingdom of God and that could never happen if he stayed in one place. God had sent him to go out to the people, to meet the people where they were, to share God's love and the promise that God's kingdom was coming, to show them by healing them, advocating for them, and offering them food and support.

We are called as individuals and as a church to do the same. Rather than waiting for people in our community to come to us, we are called to go to them. To get out and talk to people about what is happening in their lives, what their needs are, what they see other people searching for. To find ways to walk with them starting wherever they are on their life journey. To use our resources and creativity and faith and deep love for humanity to seek out ways of building connections, problem solving, and supporting people in their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. We are called to build canals to channel God's love out from this place into Ann Arbor and Washtenaw County. We are called to help grow the kingdom of God.

Of course, we have already been doing that for many years with organizations like Habitat for Humanity and House By The Side of the Road and with programs like Love Thy Neighbor. In the last year or so, we have strengthened our relationships with local agencies like the Hope Clinic and the Community Action Network. We've gone to them and asked, "What are the needs of the people you work with? How can we come alongside you in this work to support people in need?" We've sent volunteers and work crews. Our youth reorganized the food pantry at Hope Clinic and did building repairs at the Green-Baxter housing community on Green Rd. We also designated April as a month to learn about food insecurity and to advocate for changes in policy and laws to help food insecure people get the nutrition they need.

Yet, as we all know, so much has changed in the last eighteen months. Hunger and housing continue to be challenges - and the housing crisis is likely to get worse now that the moratorium on evictions put in place during Covid has ended. The pandemic has brought other challenges, as well. A team from our Leadership Council and staff has been talking to community leaders to learn what the impact of Covid has been here in Washtenaw County.

One concern that has come up is the morale of health care workers. We live in a community with two hospital systems in which hundreds of people work. The last eighteen months have been brutal for them. What might we as a congregation do to support them?

Another common concern among community leaders right now is the growing mental health crisis. The pandemic has taken a toll on everyone, and anxiety and depression have skyrocketed during this time - especially among young people. Is there a way we can partner with local organizations like NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, to begin to address this?

We hear from teachers both here in Ann Arbor and in surrounding school districts about what kids have lost both in social growth and academic growth. While teachers did an amazing job of providing learning online, some students fell behind - particularly those who live in challenging circumstances already. What can we do to help?

And, of course, we are living in a time of racial reckoning in which the inequities in our society have become so apparent. Earlier this year, Shonagh, our deacon of social justice and community relations, began a relationship between our church and the Ann Arbor police chief, Michael Fox. Fox and Community Engagement Sergeant Corey Mills joined us for a session of our Vital Conversations class where we were able to talk about racial justice and policing. In August, Chief Fox then invited members of our congregation to be part of a community conversation about reimagining policing in Ann Arbor. Stay tuned for next week's sermon to hear more about what we might do to advocate and support our community as we address racism.

Like Jesus, we are sent to go out and meet people where they are. These are just a few places in which our congregation could make a real difference in our community. Our staff, particularly Shonagh and Amy Kennedy, has already started creating canals out from our church into our community so we can touch more people's lives. How might you join them? What other needs do you see where we might build relationships and channel God's love to others?

This is what it means to do kingdom work. What is your part? What canal can you build? Whom can you walk aside as we navigate together through this time like no other? Each of us can live our lives as canals. May we as a church and each of you individually listen to our world's great needs and become channels of the kingdom. Amen.