

Now What? A Guide to Faithful Discernment: Remember Who You Are

John 15: 1 - 8

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As many of you know, my father passed away quite recently. I want to thank all of you who have sent cards and emails, made meals for us, and have been ready with a hug for me or for Emmett. Naturally, I've been reflecting on Dad a lot since his death - particularly on how he and Mom came together to form and shape a family with its own unique identity. We were, and are, the Crump family, bound together by a common set of beliefs, values, strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and ways of thinking. Crumps are smart, sensitive, and compassionate. We are empathetic and are deeply concerned about social justice. We're a funny blend of analytical and emotive. We love word play, puzzles, the outdoors, reading, music, and being together. Who we are is an expression of the unique qualities of our two parents grafted together. And while we are each individuals and our lives have taken us in different directions, the core values and characteristics of our family continue to shape our lives.

Of course, this is true for all of us. We all bring with us the important values and priorities of our families. We change and grow and adapt to new circumstances and challenges, but we don't lose what is core to our identities. We remember who we are.

So, that is our theme today as we wrap up our sermon series on faithful discernment. Part of how we discern a path forward is by recognizing our core values and considering how to express those values in today's world and into the future.

Of course, Jesus understood the importance of remembering who you are. In our scripture reading for today, he uses the metaphor of a vine and its branches to describe our Christian family identity. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." So, as followers of Jesus, our core identities are found in him. If he is the vine and we are the branches, he is the source of our spiritual DNA. We are the expression of his values in the world. Therefore, as individuals, we not only consider what we do in church on Sunday as our expression of faith, but we seek to embody Jesus in the world every day. That may be in the ways we volunteer in our community, how we choose to prioritize our spending, what we teach our children about kindness and justice, or our willingness to engage with strangers.

Throughout our lifetimes, how we express our Christian values may change. For example, a belief in justice may be absolutely fundamental to who you are. As a young person you might march in marches or participate in boycotts. As an adult, you might join the diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts at your place of employment. And as a retiree, you may choose to write letters to congress and donate to the causes you feel most passionate about.

All of this is true for us as a church, as well. We need to understand our core values as a congregation, and then consider how we express those values in meaningful ways for today's world. So, who are we at FUMC? What is core to our identity?

First of all, I think we are a congregation that values education. That is a natural extension of our Wesleyan heritage and, of course, of living in a university town. Christian education and growth opportunities for young people have always been particularly important to us. Yet, the world is changing. Families who once had church as a part of their weekly routine lost the habit during covid. Meanwhile, children and youth have more and more other activities offered on (weekends) Sundays. And we now have a whole generation of parents who didn't go to church when they were growing up so don't see that as a priority for their own children. So, what does it look like to reach children and youth now? Does it happen inside the building or outside? On Sunday or another day? At the same time as worship or before or after? What can we do to make spaces in the church buildings that work well for a new generation?

We have also been a hub of spiritual growth for adults - particularly in the last ten years. We have weekday Bible studies and a regular schedule of Sunday classes on topics like science and religion, food insecurity, spiritual practices, disability awareness, and global issues. We have also brought some amazing speakers to FUMC including Diana Butler Bass and Anne Lamott. Yet, the vast majority of people who participate in these classes and events are over the age of 55. How can we meet the spiritual needs of younger adults and parents? How might our spaces be configured differently to be more comfortable and engaging for them?

A second value we have is inspiring and meaningful worship. For those of us who are already in our church, which means excellent music, a time of corporate prayer, and a well-written sermon delivered from the pulpit downtown or a music stand at Green Wood. Yet, if we, like Jesus, focus on those who aren't here - on young people and young families, on people of color, on people who have never been to church or have been hurt by church, on people who are disabled, on people who don't have homes or wealth - what might be meaningful and inspiring to them? And, of course, how might our facilities need to change in order to accommodate different styles or times of worship - including online?

A third core value of our church is to care for each other and to care for our community and world. We have long had a prayer chain, a visitation team, and Stephen Ministers. Our small groups have been sources of support for multiple generations in our congregation. But, what needs do people in our congregation have now that are different than twenty or thirty years ago? In fact, even five years ago, given all the changes that came with Covid. What does it look like to offer care and support to those who now participate in church solely online? When people come as newcomers to our church, what will make them feel that this is a place they can call home?

In caring for the world, two of our longest lasting and most impactful ministries - Love Thy Neighbor and the Bishop Lawi Imathiu Secondary School - came to be when someone recognized an unmet need. In the case of Love Thy Neighbor, that need was a lack of food on weekends for those who are homeless or food insecure. A group from our church began to make sack lunches and collect canned foods to be distributed at the St. Andrews breakfast on Saturday mornings. Meanwhile, another group learned of the need for a secondary school in the community of Meru, Kenya. In the years since, we have not only built a school but have started a band program, sponsored students going on to university, and begun a feeding program for elementary children who live in the same area.

How might we use the resources we have to meet unmet needs in our community and world today? What if we used some of our property to build affordable or senior housing? Could

we use some of our space for a tutoring program, mental health services, an art gallery or music studio for use by under-resourced artists, classes in cooking on a budget, a clothes closet for trans people in transition, a downtown or northside food pantry? And how can we make meeting these needs easily accessible to young adults, senior adults, and families?

Finally, I think a core value in our congregation has been, and continues to be, social justice. In the sixties that was expressed in picketing City Hall for fair housing, addressing concerns of race and religion, and advocating for peace during the Vietnam War. In more recent years, we have taken a stance on LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church by passing our welcoming statement in 2007. Some ten years later, the Immigration Hospitality Team formed to address issues around immigration and deportation. Now, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, we are going back to the work begun by our church in the 1960's and learning about and addressing racial injustice.

What other justice issues are before us today? How can we use the many resources we have to impact them? How can we draw other people who share our concerns into the work we do to build a more just society?

These values I've identified - education, worship, caring for each and the world, and advocating for justice - are who we are and always will be. However, if we hope to be the church in the 21st century, to sustain ourselves or even to grow, we have to evolve in how these values are expressed. Churches that survive and thrive adapt and change while they are still healthy rather than waiting until they are in crisis. They recognize that church is not at the center of community life as it once was, so they must reach out to meet people where they are. Churches that thrive realize that their facilities need to be inviting, not intimidating, offer different kinds of worship, learning, and serving spaces, and be well-utilized throughout the week - possibly even as a source of income. And, perhaps most importantly, focus on relationships rather than doctrine and seek to build the kin-dom of God, to be authentically warm and welcoming to all kinds of people, and to celebrate our diversity as children of God.

To that end, I invite you to do a little exercise I did with our leadership council recently. In your bulletin, you have a slip of paper describing a type of person we don't see much in our congregation. Before you leave today, I invite you to go outside, stand in front of the building, and look at it through the eyes of the person described on your slip of paper. What do you learn from seeing our church from their perspective?

Much like a family, a church has a core identity. And, like each individual family member, each church chooses how to express its core values to the world. As we do this strategic work on our facilities, we have the opportunity to consider how best to share our core values, Christ's core values, with a whole new generation and generations to come through our worship, our programming, and our spaces. How will we continue to grow new branches from the life-giving vine of Christ's love?

May it be so. Amen.