

Weaving Beloved Community

1 John 4:7-9, 16b-21

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May 14, 2023

Many years ago now, I served as a seminary intern at the First United Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois. One of the annual events at that church was a gourmet French meal prepared by the senior pastor, Dean Francis. The dinner was a fundraiser for the church's yearly trip to Appalachia with the Appalachia Service Project.

Now, Dean was an important mentor to me as I was preparing to enter ordained ministry. I had (and still have) tremendous respect for him. He was an excellent preacher and a great leader, and I knew I could learn a lot from him. But, I wasn't too sure about this gourmet cooking thing. Unlike my colleague, Pastor Jenaba, I do like to cook, but I couldn't quite imagine cooking a French meal for my congregation every year. Surely, this was not an expectation of all United Methodist clergy!

After several months, I learned that Dean had actually taken a three-month sabbatical from the church and gone to France to learn French cooking. Not only that, but all of his expenses had been paid by a grant from the Lilly Endowment, which annually gives grants to churches for their clergyperson to take a leave and do something that will renew them in spirit, energy, vision, and joy.

What I didn't understand was how Dean managed to get the time away until several years later when Doug Paterson, another mentor and our former senior pastor, told me that the Book of Discipline actually allows for clergy to take three-months of renewal leave every six years.

And that is what has led us to this day - I will be here next weekend, but this is my last weekend to preach before I take a leave for the summer and go on my own adventure funded by the Lilly Endowment. Sorry to say that unlike my friend and mentor, Dean, I am not going to learn French cooking, but I would like to tell you a little bit about what I will be doing because it involves you and the future of FUMC.

Ever since the start of the pandemic, I've been aware of my own growing spiritual fatigue. I suspect a lot of you have felt that some of that, too. I think it is one of the reasons why we see declining attendance numbers. We all know that recent years have been tough. Just 8 months after I became senior pastor, in March of 2019, there was the special General Conference of the United Methodist Church called for the purpose of helping us move beyond our stalemate over LGBTQ inclusion. To many people's shock, rather than moving us closer to full inclusion, the conference ended with even more restrictions put in place on LGBTQ folks and their church allies. Many in our congregation were very angry, as was I, and we began to consider the possibility of disaffiliation from the denomination.

Fortunately, we were not alone, and it soon became clear that a majority of United Methodists in the United States wanted a more inclusive church. Before long, we could see that a split in our denomination was inevitable. We hoped that there would be a resolution at the regular General Conference in 2020.

But, no. Instead, 2020 brought the start of the covid pandemic and we, like nearly all churches, closed our doors. The General Conference was canceled. Our staff here at FUMC did an amazing job of learning how to create worship and programming online and to sustain our community when we couldn't meet in person.

Only two months into the pandemic, George Floyd was murdered by white police officers - an event which led our country to finally begin talking about systemic racism. The United Methodist Church made a commitment to anti-racism as did we as a congregation. We held book studies, marched on Juneteenth, and rewrote our welcoming statement to be more broadly inclusive. The path has not always been smooth - we've made mistakes, discovered our own hidden biases, and even lost a few members who either were offended by talking about racism in church or angry that we weren't doing more. No path to growth is without challenges.

Meanwhile, the pandemic entered a new phase as the world slowly opened up again. It seemed that every day there were new decisions to make to try to keep us all safe. A huge thank you goes to our covid task force for the important role they have played along the way. At the same time, people were re-evaluating their lives and leaving their jobs in pursuit of greater fulfillment, more time with family, more money, or the flexibility to work at home. Like many companies and organizations, we lost several staff members in the great resignation.

All of this was set against a background of increasing polarity in our society, seemingly endless gun violence, and mud-slinging not just in the political arena but in our denomination as it splits, as well.

No wonder we are spiritually exhausted! There has been so much uncertainty, fear, and negativity. We all need rest and renewal after these years of shared trauma, and I think we are in need of renewal as a church, as well. After so much disruption and anxiety, I've been praying a lot about what might give us a new sense of vitality and energy. I've realized that what motivates me, what keeps me doing this work even when it gets really hard, might also motivate you. That is my deep desire to make this world better for my children and grandchildren and my belief that the church has something incredibly valuable to offer in that endeavor. We have hope for a better world, we have a community built on love, we have a faith that says it's never too late. Above all, we have God's vision of the kingdom of God, something Dr. Martin Luther King called the beloved community.

The phrase "beloved community" was first coined by a nineteenth century Harvard philosopher named Josiah Royce. He described the Beloved Community as "a spiritual or divine community capable of achieving the highest good as well as the common good." Of course, we are most familiar with it from the preaching and teaching of Dr. King. According to The King Center, King's Beloved Community is a global vision in which:

- All people can share in the wealth of the earth.
- Poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it
- Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood

- International disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power
- Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.

So, what if we commit ourselves to being that community as a church. Not just as a nice ideal but as something we actively, intentionally pursue? What if we become the church in town that is known for its warmth and joy and generosity? What if we become a source of positivity, hope, and healing in our community at this time when so many people are worn out or depressed? What if we are a church that not only has a welcoming statement but feels like home to whomever walks in our door?

I have a vision in which we as a congregation are a living, breathing microcosm of the beloved community, of the Kingdom of God.

Dr. King once said, “Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.” Over the next several weeks, I am going to be visiting churches that have a reputation for being genuinely welcoming to all the people who walk in their doors - black, white, wealthy, poor, straight, gay, immigrant, lifelong resident, cisgender, non-binary. They are churches where difference isn’t just tolerated but warmly embraced, where people get caught up in the love and joy of the community as soon as they arrive. Many of them are also churches which have made changes to their buildings to create spaces that are both physically accessible and spiritually accessible.

I want to learn what qualitative and quantitative changes they have made to become not just more diverse but more vital, healthy, and joyful. I will attend worship at several of these churches, but I’m also going to interview their pastors and members of their congregations. I want to gather as many ideas as I can about how they have created churches that are filled with energy and joy when so many churches are slowly dying. How do they nurture faith? How do they communicate love and acceptance to the homeless as well as the CEO’s? What are their worship services like? How have they cared for people’s mental health? What changes have they made to their buildings? How will they stay financially sustainable? What challenges have they faced as their congregations became more diverse?

The other thing I’ll be doing during this time is traveling to different places to learn how to weave. I’ve been interested in learning to weave for a long while so that is what I chose as my renewal activity. I am intrigued by weaving as a spiritual practice. However, I also love the idea of weaving a tapestry as a metaphor for weaving together all sorts of people into beloved community.

In addition to my activities, the Lilly Endowment grant also pays for the congregation to pursue activities that build awareness of our place in our community and our history as a predominantly white congregation. Over the coming year or so, some of the projects we’ll be pursuing together include learning our church’s role in the history of black Ann Arbor, researching the indigenous owners of this land, looking into options for reparations, building bridges to other churches in town including the AME and Korean Methodist churches, learning

from speakers and book studies, and creating an outdoor loom where everyone can participate in weaving our community together.

My hope is that not only I will find inspiration and renewal through this time but that we will, as well. That we will build on everything we have been and begin to dream about the congregation we want to be in the 21st century, and that some day each person in our church will be able to say, “this is what I am doing to build the kingdom of God”.