

# WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Sermon for June 30, 2019

By Lisa Watts

I don't know about you, but I am not someone who naturally embraces change. I like to have things planned out well in advance and I find it difficult to change direction at the last minute. I love a well-planned path with clear directions and a firm destination. This is pretty funny when you consider that much of my ministry here at Rocky River Presbyterian Church involves working with children and youth. Kids are not always prone to following a plan, no matter how well thought-out it is. I can't tell you how many times I have had to do a quick change on a youth retreat, due to weather, illness, or even a session that is obviously going south. My fellow youth leader, Dave Hensel has a term for this- "keep your knees loose." It is a skill I am still trying to acquire, and I have a herd of unpredictable youth to thank for much of my progress. A few weeks ago, we were in the midst of Vacation Bible School with 151 children and nearly 100 volunteers. You need to know that my fellow coordinators, Bette Case and Sharon Armstrong, and I start meeting every February, carefully evaluating curriculum, designing tee shirts, choosing leaders and storytellers, discussing possible mission projects, and planning every small detail that goes into such a week. After years and years of doing this, the formula seems to work well. We all have our roles and we count ourselves successful when we get to the end of the week and we have not had to bandage too many scraped knees, the kids leave each day joyfully singing "Kids of the Kingdom", and we don't run out of the two favorite snacks- hot pretzels and popsicles. Things were going along this year, mostly according to the carefully laid out plans. After we finished on Wednesday, I received a long and thoughtful email from a first-time adult volunteer. She shared what a great week her own children were having and thanked us for all of our hard work to make a successful week for everyone. She then shared, in detail, several suggestions that she thought might help to improve future Vacation Bible Schools. Sometimes it takes a fresh pair of eyes and a new perspective to see a better way to do something. . It was obvious that she had put a great deal of thought into her words. I read the email once and stashed it in my VBS folder. I kept thinking about it, so later than week, I pulled it out again and re-read it. She had made some

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really excellent suggestions. It reminded me that the carefully laid out plans we use can change, and change for the better. I shared her comments with Sharon and Bette and they agreed that these were ideas well worth considering for future VBS weeks. I know that I sometimes fall into that mentality of “we have always done it that way” and that is not good. Yes, structure is my friend. However, over the years I need to be reminded that change is often necessary and sometimes it can bring unexpected benefits.

Recent years have been challenging to our faith community here at RRPC. We are seeing a decline in weekly worship attendance, church school attendance, and attendance at youth fellowship meetings. This is not unique to our congregation. It is an issue in other churches in our denomination and beyond. I take part in several social media groups that are like chat rooms for church educators, and almost all of these educators are facing similar circumstances. Many are in a sort of “survival mode.” I have served for the past 6 years on the national board for APCE, which is the Association for Presbyterian Church Educators. This has become a major topic for the keynote speakers and workshop leaders at our annual conferences. What is becoming increasingly clear to all of us is that it is not the people we serve who need to change. It is the church that needs to change to stay vibrant and vital in today’s culture. But...what exactly does that mean?

About six years ago I received a call from Liza Hendricks, the then executive presbyter for the Presbytery of the Western Reserve. She asked me if I would be willing to serve on a short term task force for the presbytery that was going to look at ways to revitalize the presbytery and its’ member congregations. This was called the NOVA task force. I assumed NOVA was an acronym for something, but it turns out I was mistaken. We were called the NOVA task force because a Nova is a large star that explodes. After the explosion, it is smaller but it burns even more brightly than before. That’s a neat image. I agreed to serve and we began meeting that January. The first task given to us was to read the book ***Journey in the Wilderness*** by Methodist pastor, Gil Rendle. Rendle takes

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a hard look at the future of the church. He is convinced we are in for big changes in the coming years and we MUST adapt if we are to survive as healthy congregations. Now you have to remember that I am someone who finds the term “BIG CHANGE” more than a little unsettling. At first this book made me very uncomfortable. Here’s a quote from the first chapter,

“It isn’t often that a whole people go through a religious wilderness together. Yet in North America that has been the case in my lifetime and in my experience...At some point or another there have been moments of discomfort in each of these religious bodies- Protestant, Catholic and Jewish- that have required refocusing, restructuring, or restaffing. But rare is the radical, rooted shift in a global culture that prompts and requires a whole people to question their practices and enter a prolonged wilderness in search of their future way of life. Ours has been such an exodus, an escape (or perhaps an expulsion) from a constraining past in search of a promised, and findable, future.”

Does this sound vaguely familiar? It should. As an analogy for his entire book, Rendle uses the story of the Israelites exodus from Egypt. It is the image of a people who have been taken out of a way of life that is well known and deeply established. It is a time of doubt, questioning and searching. As Moses was leading his people for so many years, times were usually hard. But we can recall that through such a messy and oh-so-very-human exodus, the Israelites were changed from those who were slaves in the old land to become a new nation for God, called to live in a new place. But Moses’ followers were unhappy and sometimes just downright cranky-they complained about everything. Rendle suggests that today’s society isn’t much different. We are okay with the trip, but we expect that the trip can be scheduled on a clear time line, that our church leaders will know the right direction to walk every day, that faithfulness will not be challenged, and that everyone will willingly take the trip together without argument. Not likely. That’s human nature. And were such an orderly trip even possible, the fact remains that neat, tidy trips produce little learning and perhaps, in the end, no change.

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So, where are we going? And more importantly, perhaps, why are we going there? Take a look at today's reading from the gospel of Luke. Jesus has one thing to say to his audience that day, "Follow me." Two words, without much doubt to their meaning. What response does Jesus get to this? "I will, but first let me bury my father." "I will, but first let me say goodbye to those in my house." "I will, but..." The people seem willing to do what Jesus asks, but they all have more important things to do first. One could argue that these tasks are as important as following Jesus, but Jesus tells them that nothing is more important than following him. Priorities. It was a very real struggle for the people of Jesus' time, and it is a very real struggle for us today. Where once Sunday was a day reserved for church, rest, and reflection, today's reality is that we are forced to make choices. Increasingly, people are faced with sports, travel, lessons, homework or work, or just the basic need for some down time on Sundays. This is one of many reasons we are seeing declining numbers in worship and church school attendance.

However, here is an interesting observation. Even though our mainline churches are struggling with declining numbers and financial issues, Rendle states that

" the search for and interest in a relationship with God shows no evidence of weakening in multifaith and personal spiritual dimensions."

As busy as we are both individually and as a society, we still have that longing for a spiritual connection with God and others in a community of faith. We crave those relationships, even though our lifestyle is making it harder and harder.

So how do we change? I think it is time for us to really examine ourselves. What are we doing as a congregation that is not working anymore? What are some things we could try? What changes can we make to our worship and programming that would better serve people where they are now? These are questions I have struggled with. Your Vitality and Renewal Committee has spent a great deal of time dealing with this very issue.

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Change is not easy. Change brings anxiety. That's normal. But it can also bring hope. Our current situation is driven by the need for the mainline church to connect with the fast-changing culture and people that surround it outside of the heavy walls of tradition ( or "we've always done it that way") and our learned behavior. In the coming months, you may very well see some small or even large changes in the sanctuary, our worship services, our Christian education programs, and our special programs, to name a few. Look for more "cross-generational" programming, like the game night our youth hosted in May. It was such a joy to watch the youth of this church get to know older adults over a game of Jenga and a piece of cake. Look for our youth to be even more involved in outreach and mission projects, such as baking dessert for the Community Meal or collecting toilet paper for an organization in need. You may also see more adult education opportunities beyond one small but very committed Sunday morning class. Look for changes in appearance to our sanctuary and church school classrooms. Look for more youth and children involved in our weekly worship services. If you know me at all, you know that one of the things I tell people over and over again is that children and youth are NOT the future of our church. They ARE our church, in the here and now, every bit as much as folks who have been members for decades. The bottom line is that we are to be in community with each other, regardless of age or ability. That is something that has not changed and will never change. It is what God has called each and every one of us to be. What will change is the way that we, as a vibrant and committed community of faith, reach out to each other...AND to the community around us.

The challenge here is to keep God in the forefront. Too often we think WE know what's best. We need to work very hard to allow God to lead us and to discern who and what God is calling us to be as Rocky River Presbyterian Church. Our God is a God of surprises. We should not allow ourselves to believe we are in control and miss seeing God as capable of surprising us. Through prayer and deliberate discernment, we can learn what God's plan is for us. In what ways do we further the kingdom of God here on earth? One of the basic tenets of our faith as Presbyterians is that we are "reformed and always reforming." As we proceed to our future,

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remember that we are reforming and being reformed as a new people of God. Change is coming, but it isn't something to be feared. It is something to look forward to. The future will be different but it will still be God's.

In our faith tradition as Presbyterians, we "commission" our church leaders. The dictionary defines commission as, "and instruction, command, or duty given to a person or a group of people." Very recently we commissioned some folks to serve as elders and deacons. Perhaps we should all consider ourselves commissioned to continue our work as a congregation in new and different ways. We are a strong and vital community of faith. Let's face the future committed to continuing to be. This morning's reading from Joshua is a commission from God as Joshua prepares to "take over" after the death of Moses. Listen again to the last part of that reading, "I have commanded you to be brave and strong, haven't I? Don't be alarmed or terrified, because the Lord, your God is with you wherever you go."

Amen.