

We Must Stretch in Order to Grow

Acts 11:1-8

Our dear brother, Peter -the Rock, has quite a dream in the Book of Acts. In it he is asked to do something that is expressly forbidden by his faith, eating non-kosher food. And what is his response? "But I have never done that before! It is wrong." But the voice in the dream responds, "Don't call wrong what God has made right." Peter is experiencing a religious crisis that is described in the psychological phrase, cognitive dissonance. It reflects a struggle in the mind to rectify two opposite ideas. And it is a difficult, confusing and anxiety producing process. But such stretching of the mind, such a challenge to the status quo is also a necessary part of growth, for individuals and for congregations as well.

Cognitive dissonance and the challenge of changing long held beliefs is not fun.. When it comes to change, we tend to resist and fight it because it is hard. And it is not just us that feels this way. The wider church resists change. As the old adage says the seven last words of the church are: ***we have always done it this way!***

You may be asking, "why are we talking about change? Things are going well here, we are not in crisis either spiritually or financially. Why would we want to rock the boat?" Well, there are two answers to that question, one general and one particular to us.

The general issue is the wider church in the U.S. is in crisis. A few months ago the Pew Research Center, confirmed what many already suspected: that Christianity is in decline in the U.S. Not only is it declining among protestants like us, but the research says Catholic and now, Evangelical churches are also declining and that's new. The study also tells us the number of people who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or spiritual but not religious has jumped over six percentage points and shows no sign of stopping. People are practicing their spirituality through 12 step programs, personal meditation or yoga, or other non-traditional, non-institutional means. Or they are not doing anything to nurture or challenge themselves spiritually because they don't think it is important.

The particular issue with Faith United Church of Christ is that - much to my surprise since January 1st of this year we have had nearly 100 unique visitors come through our doors and worship with us. In one sense that's good news. And some wonderful people have decided to come back and become part of Faith church. But the percentage of people who

don't come back is very high. Oh, we know some will not stay because of our welcoming of all people and our theological openness but this is not always the case. I know several visitors came precisely because we are an open and affirming congregation, so we cannot give ourselves that easy excuse. We must instead ask honestly "why people don't come back?"

Faith has always prided itself on being a welcoming space. We greet people at the door we have a lovely guestbook that we ask people sign, we talk to them after service, we have in the past acknowledged them during the service and given them things to take home. We have welcomed many people these ways successfully in our 27 years, but these tried and true ways are not working any more. We live in a different time, a time that when you enter a store and the clerks all make sure to greet you and say welcome to "insert store name here". We are in a time when everyday someone tries to get our personal information so they can send us emails with offers and unique reports. And so people in general are a little wary of overly friendly and solicitous people because there are many in this world who use being friendly for their own agenda of getting more customers. Because the time is different, we have to adjust how we welcome people.

The latest research on church growth suggests that visitors don't like to be overly greeted when they come. A welcome at the door is fine, but then they like to just observe. They like to see for themselves exactly what it is they're walking into. In the past when people came to church they usually came because they already had some connection to the congregation or even the denomination. Today fewer have any religious background and still fewer have a denominational affiliation and so when visitors come we must first do no harm. We have to not scare people away and so we have to do things now that may seem odd to us; things like greeting people at the door but then letting them look around and take in the place in their own way. We will not ignore them, but instead give them ways to ask questions when they want. We are working on some new, more gentle ways to get people information about us and allow them to share their information when they are ready.

We are going to give people enough space to see for themselves that we are a caring and supportive community. Asking people for their information right away is perceived as us being interested in them to meet our needs for more customers. Trying to get people to keep

coming back because we need them is actually quite the opposite of our goal as a church: to be here for people in order to meet their spiritual needs. We are called to share Gods good news and help all who walk through our doors deal with life in this very difficult world. So some of our ways of worship and being Church need to be examined and many will need to be changed, because people have changed. They have different hopes, needs and expectations than they did 10 years ago and if we are here to serve them, we must change.

I don't particularly like having to change. It would be a heck of a lot easier for Jude and I to just keep doing what we've been doing for the last 25 years. It would take less effort too. But all that would do is keep me comfortable. Like Peter we have come to a point where we listen for God and get on board with the new things God is doing. We must realize that if the church is to grow - and I'm not talking about sustain or survive I'm talking about growing - we are going to have to do things differently in 2016 and some of those things are going to cause us discomfort and cognitive dissonance. This can be very hard because we come to church to be comforted and to have some stability, some sense of the eternal in this ever changing world. Let me assure you we are still going to celebrate our rich heritage: we are not throwing out the old hymns, but we will add new music. We are not throwing out the Lord's prayer but now and then we might say it a little differently. We are going to maintain The gospel of Christ, but we will remember that it is a living gospel, not just words on a page. The Spirit of God is a living growing adventure and as we humans have changed, God has met us everywhere we turn and that is what we celebrate. And so at our meeting after worship today we will talk about some things we're going to try; some experiments where we stop doing some things we've done for a long time and start doing some things that we've never done before and we're going to see how it goes. We are going to move when some things happen in worship all to try to welcome people by giving them space to experience God at Faith UCC. We want to show everyone who walks through our doors that this is a place of love and care and nurture and that they are welcome to come and participate when and how they choose to.

There are two popular images I want to put in your mind about this. The first is Starbucks Coffee. One of Starbucks goals is to become peoples third place. What do they

mean by that? We all have a home and many of us a place of work. Those are the two places and Starbucks wants to create a 3rd welcoming and comfortable space for people to find renewal and strength and fun. How can we become a comfortable third place for people? Certainly we can't expect new people to want to come in and start joining right away or to give money, or to roll up their sleeves to work. People are looking for a third place where they can come to find peace and spiritual strength and hope in a world full of sorrow despair and exhaustion How can Faith church become the third place for people.

To help answer that I want to go back in television history to the comedy Cheers. Many of you remember the bar where Sam and Diane, Coach and Carla, Cliff and Norm built a community of caring. Whenever Norm entered the bar the entire bar shouted his name in welcome. This is the kind of welcome we hope everyone can experience here. But we must remember that when Norm first came to the bar, the only thing Sam, the bartender did was to ask, "what can I get you?" He didn't ask for Norm's name or phone number or address but he served him refreshments in a place for quiet reflection or spirited conversation depending on what Norm wanted at the time. Over time Norm is recognized and being welcomed back as a regular contributing part of the community. But he started their only receiving something he wanted. I imagine if Sam had instead started right off asking too many questions or giving him the hard-sell on the bar. Norm might've hoisted his drink, look curiously at Sam and probably never come back. People are looking for a safe place to explore, to question, to be nurtured and we have to create that safe space. That's the first thing- the first goal; to make sure this is a place where people can find joy and love and caring - not because we tell them that's what is here by making them hold our hand, but because they see it in the conversations and the interactions and the worship and in the safe non-intrusive welcome they receive. We can do it! We will have some cognitive dissidence, some discomfort but I believe if we work through it together the message of God will go farther and reach more people with God's dream for Bradenton in 2015 Amen