

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

Pentecost 9 with reading from Pentecost 8
Ephesians 2

25 July 2021
Salem, Bridgeport

“The Secret to Saving a Dying Church”

*For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Those were the words that sparked the protestant reformation.

Luther and those like him realized that the church had become an institution unto itself

& no longer reached people on the outskirts, the edges, the margins with the news of God’s power & love.

The Reformation began as a movement of the Spirit,

galvanizing peasants to rise up and rebel and revolt against the church and against society

which were oppressing them & victimizing them & treating them unjustly without respect & love.

The movement gathered momentum, established a foothold,

and grew into an institution with organization and structure

that eventually came to look very much like the institution of the Roman Catholic Church

it had tried to reform.

And today we are faced with the truth

that our congregation and our denomination and mainline Protestantism and Roman Catholicism
are all dying institutions.

Of course there are congregations that are not, but the numbers cannot be denied. The church is dying.

And here is why.

According to a continuing education course I took 6 or 7 years ago

that’s how organizational dynamics flow –

from a life-giving movement into a structured organized institution

that eventually is eclipsed by a new movement.

Here’s how it works:

Change begins on the outskirts, the margins, the edges of the predominant culture and its institutions.

It begins there because that is where there is the need.

As the movement gathers momentum, it picks up followers and grows, establishes as a foothold,

and then builds a foundation on top of which it creates a new institution with organization and structure.

If the institution continues to build relationships with those on the outside, the outskirts, the margins,

and to learn from those people how to adapt to a changing world,

then the institution can continue to grow and thrive.

But as soon as an institution stops engaging with the outside world,

stops building relationships with those outside its structure, stops listening and learning and adapting,

it ceases to grow and thrive and eventually it will die and be replaced by something else.

The Church is dying, but it doesn’t have to be.

There is a life-saving prescription we can follow if we want to live.

And it is found in the same chapter of Ephesians

as the words that brought new life to Luther, to the church, and to the world.

And here are the words:

“Christ...has made ...[different] groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall... between us.

He has abolished the law...that he might create...one new humanity in place of the two,

thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross....

So then you are no longer strangers...but... members of the household of God,

built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;

in whom you also are built together....

In the beginning Christianity was just a reformed sect of Judaism.
And then God called Paul to take the gospel to Gentiles.
At first this did not go over well and it took all of Paul's powers of persuasion
to convince James and John, the leaders of the church, of the legitimacy of his call.
But when Gentile Christians were brought into churches with Jewish Christians,
the Jewish Christians said, "Of course you're welcome –
as long as you think like us, worship like us, and live like us",
to which the Gentile Christians said,
"Why should we be like you? Why don't you think and worship and live like us?"

And it was to these two groups that Paul spoke, saying,
] "Don't you get it?!
Christ came to break down the walls so there would be no divisions between you!
What makes either of you think that you have it right?
God has given you as a gift to each other!
Jewish Christians you don't have it right, and Gentile Christians you don't either,
because what God desires is neither.
What God desires is for you to work together and come up with something new.
That's why Christ came – so that every other division would fall away
and the only unifying thing would be faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul understood that if the Jewish Christians kept thinking & worshipping & serving & living
the way they had been,
they would become a dying institution.
But bringing in the Gentiles from the outside, from the outskirts, from the margins,
would be the very thing that would breathe life into the church.

It's just like the course on organizational theory that I took explained:
unless the organization is open to being refreshed and renewed
by the gifts of people from the margins,
people who look different and sound different,
people who come from different backgrounds,
people who think differently and live differently,
then the invisible walls the organization has created to protect itself & its values
will become the walls of its tomb.

Ok. So I went to that class six or seven years ago,
and while I understood the theory, I had no desire to do the work.
I was a lifelong Lutheran, content with my theology, my liturgy, my hymnody,
my white Eurocentric middle class culture, my safe life inside my comfort zone.
But thank God for being a good good parent
who wasn't content to let me stay inside my Lutheran walls.
When it became clear to God I wasn't going to walk into downtown Bridgeport
and engage with people on the margins,
God decided to bring people to me,
starting by calling a lay African-American woman of Pentecostal and Baptist background
to lead a Lutheran mission in Bridgeport.
Since we were the only Lutheran congregation in town we were asked to help.
Would I be her mentor? Sure.
Would Salem be the fiscal agent for Genesis Gospel Café? Of course.
Would Salem support that ministry? Well, we'd try.
Which meant going to that Innerview chat and chew thing.
Now I'm a homebody. I like being in my own church.
I didn't really want to go to another one.

The people there would probably look different, talk different, come from different backgrounds and I probably wouldn't have anything in common with them.

And then there was the fact that I couldn't just sit in the back and be quiet.

Jeanette would make us all talk to each other! and for introverts that's really outside the comfort zone!

But I went. And luckily some of you went with me! And it wasn't so bad.

And the more I went, the more comfortable I became, and the more I enjoyed it.

I got to know some of the people and I looked forward to seeing them.

By the time March 2020 rolled around, I was sitting there for game day

and we were laughing so hard we couldn't believe it.

We had lunch, we played games we laughed, we played more games, we laughed some more,

and nobody wanted to go home, so we ordered dinner.

Finally 7 hours later, Jeanette kicked everyone out – and the next day the pandemic lockdown began.

And now there was no more interview chat and chew and I MISSED IT!

I told Jeanette we should try doing it on zoom but she said, "I don't know..."

I kept pushing & she kept saying, "I don't know..." until September when she finally decided to try it on zoom.

And in some ways that was even better because the conversations went deeper

and people from far away were able to join us.

Officially I am still Jeanette's mentor, but the truth is we mentor each other,

because we are God's gift to each other, and God works through us to change us & grow us.

And as if Jeanette wasn't enough, God sent a black Jamaican Pentecostal pastor & congregation to Salem – and I had even less in common with them!

I would go to their annual events because I'm a professional and it was part of my job,

but even though I was always welcomed warmly I felt I had nothing in common with them. Not only were we of different races, but different countries and cultures and denominations. Their worship had loud music

and people jumped up and down

and clapped their hands and waved their arms and danced and spoke in tongues.

I remember looking down on them and thinking,

"They believe the Bible literally, but I'm smarter than that.

I went to Yale Divinity School, for heavens sake!"

But as I got to know them, I began to appreciate the way they loved God,

not just with their minds but with their hearts and souls and bodies.

Their passion for worship inspired me.

And their witness to God's power to work miracles grew my faith.

And when we discussed the Bible I discovered that we were more alike than I'd ever imagined.

Lutherans, it seemed, also believed some parts of the Bible literally.

Pentecostals believed that communion was just a remembrance,

but a prime tenet of Lutheran theology is that it is not just a remembrance,

and that we actually receive Christ's body and blood.

Pentecostals baptize in the name of the Lord Jesus

and when I question how they could do that when it says right there in Matthew,

"...baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit",

I was told I shouldn't take the Bible so literally!

Pentecostals don't use the Lord's Prayer in worship

because when Jesus said, "Pray then like this...",

they don't take that literally, the way we do.

And so I learned that every Christian takes some parts of the Bible more literally than others –

it's just that we take different parts literally.

What Paul said in this part of the letter to the Ephesians

was that God gave us people who are different from us

in order to enrich our lives, in order to teach us and help us to grow, in order to bless us.

For almost my entire life I stayed within the walls

of my white Eurocentric Lutheran institutional church & I was content & comfortable there. But I need to tell you that these last three years have been the greatest adventure I've ever experienced. My faith has grown tremendously. My life has been enriched beyond measure. And the joy and excitement and peace God has poured into my life has dazzled and delighted me in ways I could never have even imagined.

Back in Luther's day, the Spirit spoke through this 2nd chapter of Ephesians about grace and began a movement outside the rigid structure and organization of the institutional church which gathered momentum and grew into the Protestant Reformation which changed the church and the world.

And now the rigid structure and organization of our current institutional church has once again cut us off from the abundant life God offers.

Christ has broken down every wall –

of race, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation, denomination, and political persuasion.

And yet we consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, rebuild all those walls.

We do it to protect ourselves from those who are different,

from those of who and we are afraid, from those who might require us to change.

We build walls around ourselves to protect and preserve and conserve what we have.

But the walls we build to protect us end up being the walls of a tomb,

walls that keep out the air, the breath, the Spirit of the living God.

I shared the stories of my experience with Genesis Gospel Café and New Direction Ministries because they have helped me to understand the truth of today's reading.

And the truth is that each of us has a choice.

We can choose to continue to believe what we've always believed, to do what we've always done, to be with those we've always been with – and that choice will lead to death.

Or we can choose to open our minds and hearts and spirits to the gifts that God offers us through people who look & sound & think & act differently from us – and that choice will lead to life.

That doesn't mean you have to walk by yourself to downtown Bridgeport,

select some random person off the street who looks different from you and ask them to be your friend.

It's not that hard.

Just take advantage of what God is already offering here.

Join Wednesday noontime prayer on zoom. Join Bible study on zoom at 6:30 Wednesdays.

When Jeanette Harris or Genesis Gospel Café invites you to an event, say yes.

When we have a Sunday Night Alive event, come.

Worship downstairs at 10:30 some Sunday with Christ Presbyterian Church or go to one of their events.

Worship here at noon some Sunday w/ Christ Home of Unity, Restoration, Charity & Hope, or just stick around some week to greet them and welcome them to Salem.

Get involved in the Council of Churches, particularly in their anti-racism conversations.

Yes, I know. All of those things may be out of your comfort zone; they were certainly out of mine.

But I am so grateful that I was forced to go where I didn't want to go – because that's where God met me. And I would not trade these last 3 years for anything in the world.

The secret to new life –

for you, for me, for our congregation, for our denomination, for the Church, and for the world

lies in these words from scripture: *"Christ...has...broken down the dividing wall...between us...*

that he might create...one new humanity in place of the [separate ones]"

"that he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace"

To God be the glory! Amen