

Measuring Growth

Ephesians 4:11-18

June 3, 2018

It was a chance encounter at a Blue Grass Festival in Charleston, West Virginia. In the course of conversation with two friendly women we learned that they were Presbyterians, one a staff member of the Presbytery of West Virginia and the other, a certified lay preacher for a church of 12 members. Yes, you heard me correctly. 12 members. 10 hours a week, two half days. I expressed my fascination—what’s that like preaching to 12 people? Her response? These are faithful people who love and care for each other unlike those in the large Charleston churches.

Wow. Imagine 12 people.

I looked up the stats for the Presbytery of West Virginia. In 2013, the median size of a Presbyterian church PCUSA was 30. Thirty. In the presbytery of Lake Michigan, 138.

Every pastor I know would like to see more people in their pews and most worshipers enjoy seeing the pews full, the children’s message lively, the singing robust. New members bring us joy. Every number represents a real, living person, in need of grace, a place to belong, a yearning to

matter. Numbers may also point to a need to rethink priorities, program emphases, and leadership. But we need to take care in not reducing our measure of love to numbers, metrics, statistics.

What is church health? What is a spiritually mature church? How does a church body grow itself up in love?

The most obvious answer is: Are we following Jesus? Or as Richard Rohr recently put it in his daily meditation, are we loving *what* God loves and *how* God loves? Is Jesus the one we not only say we will follow—like our new members just replied to in the affirmative-- but the one we actually do? That means not following someone else because it's easier or more popular. Following Jesus is often risky, unpopular, and challenging, but following Jesus is what Christians do, and it our first priority as individuals and as a community of faith.

But we can be more specific: I have four brief thoughts.

Here's one way.

“How are the Children?” ...this is the question asked of a Masai—a tribe in East Africa—when they meet one another, for they believe that the health of a society will be judged on the well-being of its children. Author Phillip Gulley writes that he can think of no better litmus test for public policy or religious doctrine than to regularly ask ourselves, “How will this affect our children”? “Will this increase our children’s happiness

or contribute to their misery? And not just our children but the world's children... any country, any culture", Gulley posits, that doesn't think about its children is a failed state. Or I would add, a failed church.

"Let the little children come to me". "Let the little children come to US".

Could it be that a church's health and spiritual maturity is measured by our commitment to the children? Not only one church's children; many of those churches with 30 members in West Virginia have few or none... how they support children in their communities or in the world.

A natural expansion beyond children is to consider how the church is caring for any and all vulnerable person or groups. How are the frail elderly? How are the grieving? How are the mentally ill or homeless or hungry or bullied or any discriminated-against group. These are "least of these" from Matthew 25 and Jesus says our attention to them is a matter of eternal proportions.

TWO

Move toward the pain. Not are we happy, but do we move toward the pain?

That was the surprising charge the President of Western Seminary offered the graduating class last month. He cited Russian poet

Yevtuchenko's words: "You must not believe the vulgar insulting, patronizing nonsense hammered into your head since childhood that the purpose of life is to be happy. It is the pursuit of holiness that comes with the suffering of others."

And I'd suggest that's not just the calling of graduating seminary students, but for the congregation as a body.

Move toward reconciling conflict.

Move toward trusting God with our death.

Move toward confronting hypocrisy in religion.

Move toward announcing injustice in society.

Move toward those who are sad, ill, lonely.

Why? It's the way of Jesus. Remember?

He confronted the turbulent sea saying, "Peace, be still".

He turned to the hemorrhaging woman who had touched his cloak and said, "Daughter, go in peace and be healed."

He stood in front of a tomb, a place of stinking death, and said, "Lazarus, come forth!"

He confronted cheaters in the Jerusalem temple and said "My house shall be called a house of prayer, not a den of robbers!"

He went to the cross, accepting death as a consequence of radical love and said “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing”.

Do we move toward the pain, or are we repelled by it?

Perhaps, the health and spiritual growth toward love in a congregation can be measured by our ability to sit with those who suffer, which is to sit with Jesus.

THREE

Are we creating spaces to encounter God;

To explore faith;

To express and deepen faith?

This may sound ridiculous—who wouldn’t encounter God in church. Isn’t that the point?

In a sharp contrast to the sensate richness of Catholicism with its bells and smells and cantatas and statues and stained glass, following the Reformation, Protestant worship was reduced to stark minimalism— we

moved access to God from the heart and from body senses, and relegated it to the head. Of course God is in the Words, the words on a page or in speech, but we access God through more than words.

In what circumstances does God find you, and you find God?

Music. Blaise Pascal observed that the people who have the greatest influence in shaping the hearts and minds of any generation are not the folks who write the laws, but those who write the songs.

Church Camping? Those who attended religious summer camp as children or youth were over three times more likely to remain religious five years later than those who did not attend.

Retreats—Women’s Retreat, Youth Retreats.

Ritual—like coming to the Lord’s Table.

Mission trips.

Maybe every now and then, a sermon!

Churches which provide space to encounters God will be stronger, healthier, and more compelling. Whether 12 or 412. What are we missing here?

Finally, FOUR

How are we working as a team?

At that same music festival where we met the Presbyterian women, we watched a group of musicians gathering around the shade of a tree playing fiddle, bass, mandolin, guitar. In a seamless, egoless way, they made joyful, harmonic music. But here's the remarkable thing: the group changed. Someone would step out of the circle for a while and someone else would step in. An old timer would pause and give hints to a younger player. One player might not be familiar with a tune and would lean in, listen, then echo, then in a few moments be playing up to speed and in perfect synchronicity with the others. In one song, one musician would take the lead, fade to allow another to play the melody a bit louder and then he would yield to the next.

I believe that a healthy church sustains those kinds of entrances and exits of members and staff. It shares leadership. Its older members learn from the enthusiasm and freshness of the young and the young learn from the experiences and wisdom of the older. Beauty, effectiveness, love doesn't depend on one, but on many. Egos fade, the focus is on the whole. The common good. How we love together.

A growing church, a healthy church, a vibrant church—of 12 or 30 or 450—can be spiritually mature, growing in faith when persistently tending to

following Jesus:

Prioritizing the children and vulnerable ; that's Jesus' mission.

Moving toward pain and standing beside the suffering' that's Jesus' love.

And creating space for encounters with God. That's Jesus' invitation.

And blending together like jamming Blue Grass musicians making harmony, joy, and beauty as an invisible power (dare we, especially in this Season of Pentecost, call it the Holy Spirit?).

God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love...

Christ keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.

