

Why We're Here

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Richmond Heights, Ohio

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Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-11

Text: "I give water in the wilderness . . . to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself, so that they might declare my praise." – Isaiah 43:20-21

A few years ago, Barb Holtz asked at a congregational meeting, I believe, "If this church closed, would anybody besides us notice?" It's a good question, and it's been rolling around in the back of my mind ever since Barb asked it.

Would anybody besides us notice if Faith United Church of Christ closed its doors? Does our life together in here make any sort of impact on the lives of people out there? Those are important questions, and we owe Barb our gratitude for raising them for us.

We had a version of this conversation last Wednesday night in our Lenten study, when we talked about what it means to be the church. I mentioned that this question always confronts the church, and as early as two hundred years after Jesus, two streams of thought emerged to answer that question, which my seminary professor Rowan Greer identified for us as the "club for saints" or "school for sinners" lines of thought.

The first stream, associated with the fiery North African theologian Tertullian, says that the church is a club for saints. Now that's not quite as bad as it sounds – "clubbiness" has all sorts of negative connotations these days – because in the early centuries of Christianity, one of the important biblical images to describe the church was Noah's ark. People in the early centuries of this era thought the world was falling to pieces – literally going to hell – and that the church offered a way out of that mess. The church is where people came together to support one another, strengthen one another, reassure one another, and challenge one another as followers of Jesus Christ. Paul regularly called such people saints – his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians both begin "To the saints at" -- so it was perfectly reasonable for Christians to understand themselves to be the company of the elect – a club of saints, if you will – in the midst of a very messed-up world. I have a lot of sympathy with that view of the church.

On the other hand, another understanding of the church arose which saw the church not so much as an ark – a place of refuge and safety – but rather as a schoolhouse, a place for instruction and practice. The church in this view wasn't as much a club for those who had arrived as it was a school for those who were on their way – people who had seen the light of Christ, were walking toward it, but who still wandered off the path of right living from time to time. That's what it meant to be a sinner. It didn't mean you were awful; it meant that you weren't perfect, that you knew you weren't perfect, and that you knew you would never be perfect in this world.

And the primary purpose of the church, in this view, was to help you see your imperfections and help you strive to overcome them, even as we acknowledge that we will never fully succeed. The world's an imperfect place, and we'll never be able to make it perfect, but we are called nonetheless to strive toward perfection. As the rabbis say, we may not finish the job, but we are not free to desist from it, or as Paul says in Philippians, "I press on toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." Or as Jesus himself put it, "Be perfect, therefore, even as your heavenly Father is

perfect," which means to strive toward loving the world as God loves it – perfectly.

So those two attempts to answer the question of the purpose of the church – Why are we here? -- emerged early on in our history as Christians, and they remain important ways that we continue to think of ourselves today.

We in the UCC tend more toward the “school for sinners” end of the spectrum, not because we're any worse sinners than anybody else, but rather because most of us don't see ourselves as perfected saints. We see our imperfections all too clearly, and we also see how closely entwined Christianity is with the imperfect world around it, so we don't pretend to be untainted by the world. We know that scandals plague the church no less frequently than anywhere else, and we know that we as individuals and as an institution have participated in and continue to participate in many of the systems that contribute to the world's brokenness and suffering. We know that about ourselves, and it was Reinhold Niebuhr, one of our own pastors and one of the last century's great theologians, who refused to let Christian people hide behind the illusion that the church is free from sin or that our individual righteousness keeps us from participating in systemic evil.

And I used to think that this awareness of our participation in systemic evil is one of the things that distinguishes us so-called social justice churches from the so-called evangelical churches, but I'm not so sure about that distinction any more.

For one thing, there is a growing concern among conservative evangelical churches for things like global poverty, malnutrition and disease, and the abuse of God's creation than there has been historically in churches that would call themselves evangelical.

Many of you, I'm sure, are aware of the fact that Rick Warren, pastor of one of the largest evangelical churches in the country, has had an active ministry combating AIDS in Africa for a number of years, whereas a quarter of a century ago, when AIDS first appeared in human populations, many evangelical preachers pronounced it God's judgment against gay people, even though lesbians almost never get AIDS and lots of straight people do. That sort of cruel simplistic moralizing is still part of evangelical Christianity, to be sure, but it's becoming more and more marginalized, for which we can thank God and people like Pastor Warren.

Or consider the case of the Rev. Richard Cizik, at one time one of the most powerful evangelical lobbyists in Washington. Mr. Cizik looked carefully at the evidence for global warming and other signs of human abuse of God's creation, and he called on evangelical Christians to begin working for more faithful stewardship of the environment through green practices and legislation. Many evangelical leaders denounced Mr. Cizik as abandoning evangelical principles, and because of his views on the environment, as well as his favoring civil unions for same-sex couples, Mr. Cizik was forced to resign.

But that wall of denial among conservative evangelical Christians has been breached, and it's only a matter of time – and I'd guess less than twenty years – before conservative Christians will be as green as liberal ones, and conservative Christians will be as accepting of faithful same-sex unions as progressive Christians are today.

So I think it's simplistic for those of us in progressive churches to believe that our evangelical sisters and brothers aren't concerned about social justice issues; they are. We may not agree on which of those issues are most pressing or how best to address them from a faith perspective, but we actually have far more in common in this respect than we often think.

At the same time that I see these changes happening on the right, I see other changes happening on the left. I see a new emphasis in social justice churches like ours on recovering some of the basic tools and foundational teachings of Christianity that we've tended to ignore as irrelevant or out of date or old-fashioned.

Bible study, for example. We've always had it in the UCC, of course, but we've often given it very short shrift, with the result that many people in our churches are pitifully ignorant of what the Bible actually says.

The Bible is *the* foundational document for the Christian faith, and without a solid working knowledge of that document, we flounder and hesitate and thrash around ineffectually trying to get our bearings in a chaotic world.

The Bible is like the pole in tether-ball: you can bat the ball of belief and action in any number of directions, and the Bible keeps us tethered to a place we can always come back to, to reorient ourselves and recalibrate our thoughts and actions. The Bible functions, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, as "the still point of the turning world," not to be slavishly and mindlessly swallowed whole, nor to be turned into an idol or a relic, but rather to provide us with a steady point of reference – a lamp for our feet and a light for our path, as Psalm 119 puts it – as we make our way through this complex and difficult world.

Or take the classes in spiritual practices that Daria's been leading with our senior high schoolers or the course in contemplative living that Pat's been leading with a group of our adults. These are ancient practices of the Christian church that go back even *before* the Christian church -- "Be still," God says in Psalm 46, "and know that I am God" -- and they are valuable tools to help us hear the voice of our still-speaking God that is so easily drowned out in the clutter and clatter of our manufactured noise. Yes, many of those practices have been preserved in the monastic tradition, for which we owe our monastic sisters and brothers a great thanks, but adapting such practices for ourselves makes us catholic with a small c – broad, universal, global, inclusive.

And that's where our faith and this sermon meet this morning's text from the prophet Isaiah: "[F]or I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself, so that they might declare my praise."

If you want an answer to Barb's question – What are we here for? -- you can find it in this verse from Isaiah. We are here to declare God's praise. We are here to reflect the divine image in which each and every one of us is created. We are here to represent, to hold up, to honor, and to live in every aspect of our lives that which is highest and best. Or, as the book of Philippians puts it, "[W]hatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence or anything worthy of praise" -- those are the things we are not only to think on, but we're to embody, to incarnate in our lives. That's why we're here.

The Spirit is at work in this church and in many churches, helping us to lift up the best from whatever tradition, from whatever source, and to put the very best that we can find or devise in the service of God's whole creation. Old barriers are breaking down on the right and on the left, and people are slowly beginning to peek out from behind the palisades and ramparts we've erected to defend our way and our group, and we're finding common cause in God's love for the whole world.

We're discovering, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, that we're going to live together as siblings or we're going to perish together as fools. That's the realization that's dawning on many of us, and as more and more of us are trying to live that realization out in daily life – not out of grim necessity, but out of a joyful awareness of the richness of God's grace in the lives of other people and in the created world around us – we are declaring our Maker's praise. That's why we're here.

So, would anybody besides us notice if this church disappeared? I believe they would. All those whose lives have been touched by the grace of this congregation – the hungry who've been fed, the poorly-clothed who have been warmed, the outcast who

have been welcomed, the faithful who have been supported, the thoughtless who've been challenged, the fainthearted who've been lifted up – these and many others would most definitely notice if the praise of God in this place were to cease – the praise we make not only with our lips, but especially the praise we make with our lives.

And so to the one who refreshes us abundantly with the waters of life in the wilderness of this world to make that praise, be honor and glory now and forever. Amen.

