

Deep Welcome is Giving at its Best: Transforming Congregations Series, part 3

Mark 9:38-50; James 3:13-18

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Wilton Presbyterian Church

Welcome to the third part in our series of Transforming Congregations. Over the last few weeks, I have been outlining the habits of mainline Protestant congregations which are not only growing, but they are thriving in our current time. The 12 habits are outlined in Ruth Fletcher's book aptly called, *Thrive: Spiritual Habits of Transforming Congregations*.

As a brief recap, Fletcher, a church consultant, says long gone are the day of propping up the church of the 50's, what she calls the "Golden Rule Church." The Church of that era leaned on the charismatic pastor who preached, did Bible Study and visited the sick and lead committee meetings. Oh yes, we pastors are still called upon to do such things, but congregations which are thriving now, are adapting to the shift which has occurred in broader culture. People are tired. People are busy. They don't want to sit in committee meetings which don't align with what they perceive as the community's current mission and purpose. Church is not necessarily the ultimate destination for many people on a Sunday morning nor is it the only social outlet they have unlike many in the 50's.

Here's the thing. One of the church's primary theological reasons *for being* is the Resurrection. The promise of new life after death, of transformation, of liberation from captivity of old ideas and ways of being through and by the Grace of God. And so it makes sense, in order not to just survive, but to thrive, the Church must also experience Resurrection... to be transformed from death into something new. It must be liberated from old ideas and ways of being.

In order to change, Fletcher quotes Charles Du Bois, "The important thing is this: to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we may become." The habits Fletcher lays out allow congregation's energies to shift and be nimble enough to focus on the current ministry/mission to which they are called and then move on to the next.

So...as a recap of the first two weeks of this series, the first 6 habits, very briefly, are these, and if you want to learn more, the last 2 sermons are online or hard copies are out in the Narthex.

Transforming Congregations: root themselves in prayer; they listen to the voice of the Spirit at work in their midst; they continue to grow spiritually; they align **their** mission with God's mission of peace, security and justice for all; they engage in ministry where there is suffering; and they testify, they talk freely about what God has done in their midst.

Now for the next three:

***Welcoming: Transforming congregations become inclusive communities by welcoming the stranger and forming mutual relationships.***

That almost seems like a given, right? But let's look and see what that might mean. We're not talking about physical welcome here, although that's a part of it. We're talking about *soul welcome*...creating and maintaining a space—a physical and spiritual place—where people feel free to come and totally be themselves, to be honest about *who they are* and *how they are* without fear of retribution or judgement. It doesn't mean that real topics aren't discussed. They are, but there is an authenticity about such discussions where hurts are laid bare and healing can occur.

That kind of welcome is whole point of what Jesus is talking about in the Gospel passage right? The disciples didn't understand the mission of Jesus, and they were afraid to ask. Then their egos and insecurities got in the way as they argued about who was the best and the greatest. And the story goes... Jesus took a little child (not given great standing in that culture) and said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."

We understand the idea of welcoming children here in this Wilton community. People move here for the school system so that their children receive the right kind of education and learning opportunities.

That's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about creating and maintaining a space where we can continually open ourselves with vulnerability, without pretense to one another as we seek to know and serve God in our midst.

Welcoming others in, requires us to open ourselves to being changed by them. We invite people in with new ideas with the understanding that they will help shape who we as a community will become, trusting that God has something to say in and through them.

Of course, part of this welcome demands creating healthy boundaries. We are part of a covenantal community. How we behave affects others. Safety of the soul comes when people know what behavior is expected and how behavior which violates our common covenant will lovingly be dealt with for the good of the community.

Practically this means, we practice Safe church in our church school---guidelines which let everyone know that their children are safely cared for when away from their parents. It also means that we respect differences with one another and are not afraid to ask questions or have doubts; we take responsibility for our own actions and attitudes as members of this community; we abide by the decisions of the governing bodies, in our case, the Session, the presbytery and General Assembly, even if they differ from our individual preferences, because we trust that they are seeking God's direction. That doesn't mean we can't challenge ideas and decisions, but we ultimately respect their decisions on our behalf.

That leads us to our next habit, number 8.

**Questioning: Transforming congregations question religious perspectives that have lost credibility and engage in robust theological dialogue about issues posed.**

It's not a surprise that many people no longer trust in the institution of the Church. Church researcher Diana Butler Bass says what we know: There is a profound disconnect between what Christianity has become and what we perceive it should be."

What does she mean? For some Christianity is a list of beliefs to which one must ascribe...do's and don'ts, in order to procure a place with God, or even to be loved by God. Fear of people who don't look like, act like or believe like them, is a driving force in political views and social norms. Trust is out the window.

Fletcher says, "*...Transforming congregations know they must lessen the gap between people's experience of God and the church's teaching about God if the church is once again to become a reliable source of wisdom.*

Certainly the current clergy abuse scandal which has reached back into past decades has been one of the driving forces of this feeling. The abuse of power by clergy has destroyed the spiritual lives not only of their own parishioners but of others of our faith and beyond.

Another factor are the more recent voices in our culture which proclaim ideologies—such as Christian nationalism, that are born out of Christian beliefs but have little to nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus...and have to be challenged. In light of our passage this morning, imagine what Jesus would say about separating children from their parents at the borders. Our collective hearts need to continue to break, and work at reconciliation.

**Here's habit 9: Building Capacity: Transforming congregations cultivate gratitude which helps them see God's provision of plenty in their midst.**

"Capacity-building invests in people, not just programs. It treats individuals as subjects rather than objects of charity. It involves education, skill-building, and economic assistance which empowers people rather than creating further dependency. ..it calls people to be responsible for their own well-being."

Beyond a focus on its members, healthy and thriving congregations shift to a focus on its mission. That's not to say we don't care for our members, but our life together is a both/and...

"Capacity-building asks people to give, not just to take. In so doing, it treats each individual as somebody with something to offer for the sake of the common good."

I mentioned during Homecoming Sunday that WPC was founded on the habits outlined in this book. We have been in a sort of holding pattern over the past few years as we have regained stasis after some movement, and now we have begun to grow deeper and are beginning to

discern, to shift our energies to our next mission. He have been praying for God's direction, and, as I said we are on the verge of something great and new. What a gift it is to be part of this congregation at this time...there is so much for which to be grateful.

How appropriate it is on the morning when we begin our Stewardship Campaign. In a few minutes you will hear from our chairs, Jock Wright and John Burgdorfer. This is not an appeal for money...that's an old idea which needs to die and experience resurrection.

When we let go of our presuppositions, fear and control and allow ourselves to be vulnerable to each other and God; when we welcome the fresh wind of the Spirit into our lives through the presence and voices of others in need...God can and will do great things! God has always beckoned each one of us with deep welcome. When we offer that to others, it is indeed giving at it's best...from hearts which are full of the grace which God has given each of us...

May it be so! Amen, and Amen!