

A New Look at Jesus: Transforming Congregations Series, part 4

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

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Welcome to the final part of the sermon series on Ruth Fletcher's book, *Thrive: Spiritual Habits of Transforming Congregations*. If you haven't heard or read the other three parts, and you'd like to, you can find them on our website or out on the credenza just outside the sanctuary.

Fletcher outlines 12 spiritual habits of mainline protestant congregations which are not only surviving, they're thriving. So what are they? Here are the ones we've covered so far:

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. Transforming congregations are welcoming—forming mutual relationships with others; they question religious perspectives that have lost credibility and take a deep dive into robust theological discussion about issues posed by change; and they cultivate capacity and expect accountability from their members as well as the people they serve;

Now for the final 3:

Habit 10: Transforming congregations cultivate gratitude which helps them see God's provision of plenty on their midst

My view is that this habit pretty much has to be the backdrop for the rest of them. I'm not sure why the author waits until habit 10 to list it. Let's just say, if we aren't bathed in gratitude, we'll view life through a often through a transactional lens.

Let's take a look back at our beginnings. The community of faithful people which formed WPC used their time together in the church to be a sort of rehearsal for the kind of community they lived each day out in the broader community. People gave generously of their time, their energy and certainly of their money, because they were excited and believed in the ministry to which God called them to do together which was vibrant inside our doors but beyond as well. Stewardship wasn't the emotional push pull which exists nowadays in many congregations where the church almost begs people to part with their money...and the reluctant, possibly resentful giving over of hard-earned cash with perhaps a degree of shame attached that not more is given.

I sincerely hope if anyone feels that way here, please let that go. Gratitude completely turns that energy on its head. *When we're steeped in gratitude, we can freely and joyously give BECAUSE we all are a part of this wonderful community which God has called into being to do great things.* It's not about YOU giving to the church so we can do and provide things for you—like church school, youth programs, pastoral care, mission projects, or even this building. That's transactional. That's not borne out of gratitude. We all participate in many ways like a co-op, so we, but mostly others can enjoy the fruits of our labors in giving, serving and loving as Jesus taught us to do.

I'm going to talk about the final two habits together first and then hone in on each.

Habit 11: Transforming congregations collaborate with other partners in order to serve God's intentions in the place where they live.

Habit 12: Transforming congregations choose to take strategic actions that heal personal, social and environmental injuries.

We, as members of faith in this town are quite fortunate to reap the benefits of a longstanding coalition of houses of worship which have banded together—Jewish, Christian, Muslim and now Hindu--to be a healing force grounded in our individual traditions. We have stood with each other in times of pain and suffering: when swastikas have been discovered in town and when the rock was thrown through the window on the Hindu Mandir property last year. We have also served side by side in service:

In a few weeks, we'll gather with these friends for Rise Against Hunger; We have resettled 2 refugee families over the years—that has taken a TREMENDOUS amount of collaboration, with struggle, and compromise; the result has been miraculous.

Within the last 7 years, WPC joined forces with other organizations in town to build affordable housing for seniors at Wilton Commons; and we helped form the ABC houses to provide teens with an educational opportunity they would not have otherwise had.

But Wilton, as a town, has a history of groups having collaborated with each other. Did you know that 36 Seely Road, (just north of Wilton High School) Wilton is one of the two sites in Fairfield County on the Freedom Trail and the Underground Railroad which Harriet Tubman and others shepherded slaves to the north and into freedom risking their own lives? This home, known as The Ovals, was owned by abolitionist William Wakeman in the years before the Civil War. Wakeman and a dedicated group of other abolitionists, many of whom attended Georgetown Baptist Church were dedicated to the local efforts. Newspaper articles recall stories about Wakeman's late night journeys to nearby towns with fugitives hidden in his wagon. A tunnel accessible by a trap door in the floor exists underneath the house, although the entrance is now sealed.

These interfaith working relationships are not always easy. There are differences. But thank God, in this day and age when we are experiencing such division in our country, we can come together and serve in a positive way. We can put differences aside and make a difference together.

But the coalitions would not work if each group was not its own entity—with its own values and beliefs. In fact, healthy interfaith dialogue is successful only when participants are clear about who they are as individual communities.

So WHO ARE WE and TO WHAT ARE WE CALLED, if we want to not just survive, but to truly thrive in our future?

I believe God is calling us to transform from the inside out. This call is not about just making changes to programs, and propping up what has been, or even working harder. Borrowing from Ruth Fletcher, "...Transforming congregations resist the temptation to clutch more to what has been, to try harder, to exert more control, or conversely, to give up, to lose hope. Instead, they surrender themselves over and over to a future they cannot see; they step out into an unknown future, trusting the Sacred Spirit to show them the way." (Fletcher p. 9)

So what are we talking about? What direction do we take?

We go back to our Source. Who was Jesus? What did he teach? And what kind of life did he call people to live? Anything foundation other than that is a human-made fabrication which has developed over the centuries as "church," and will ultimately exhaust its people before struggling and eventually dying. Congregations are rethinking how we form committees, for example. And perhaps our processes need to be checked, so we don't take forever to decide on something, talking it to death.

I have to chuckle a bit. When I first came, I remember a beloved member, many whom would call a saint, telling me early on..."you don't need to say Jesus so much"...it made that person uncomfortable. Having grown up in a fundamentalist church and then evangelicalism, I totally understand the discomfort many have had in not wanting to be associated with "that" Jesus – the one who is portrayed as judgmental, exclusionary, kind of *untouchable* by the likes of independent, smart, rational New Englanders.

But let me reassure you, modern mainline churches which are growing and which are engaged in ministry which is transforming are "reclaiming Jesus." They are taking back the image of Jesus which many over the years have distorted...and they are seeing him through a refreshing lens—as one who stood with the powerless, and helped them build capacity—to live beyond victimhood and into full, whole lives; as one who gave voice to the voiceless—in his world it was women, children, foreigners, those who were humble of heart; as one who asks his followers to let go (of expectations, of grudges, of fear and entitlement) so we may receive abundant life;

and as one who called those with power, the leaders of his day to account, who called for and urged people to love and work for peace with justice.

In a few weeks, (October 28, November 4 and November 11th) the Rev. Dr. Susan DeGeorge will return for what I always call her “knock your socks off” Bible study to address just this. Here’s how she describes her series: “These days we seem to be living in a fractured society and are stymied for ways to move beyond it. In his pamphlet *A Place Called Community*, Parker Palmer writes ‘the church, more than any other major institution in our society, still contains the potential for true community life.’ What would true Christian community life be like? What does Jesus teach us about community and our relationships with one another? This series will cover the basic values that Jesus suggests should be applied to our common life while also exploring key gospel passages that capture Jesus’ approach to such community issues. We will discuss such topics as handling conflict, making economic decisions, keeping commitments, providing hospitality, and more.” I hope you’ll make plans to attend all three sessions.

So this is a call to return to our roots—roots of the Church and roots of our particular congregation. Remember, we had humble beginnings. Wilton Presbyterian was born out of a call to a faithful few who discerned God’s vision of a Presbyterian presence here in Wilton. They founded themselves around the principles of creating a vibrant community based on what Jesus taught about serving others through sacrificial giving and hands on ministry, of growing spiritually and seeking justice for others.

So let’s do a quick and final review:

Transforming congregations: pray, they wake up and discern, they continue to grow spiritually, they align with God’s purposes for all; they engage and they testify to God’s grace-filled work; They welcome, question old beliefs, and they build capacity---in other words, they serve in a way which supports people to take responsibility for themselves and move through their wounds to healing; Transforming congregations give thanks, the collaborate and they choose to act and define themselves.

It’s a great time to be involved in WPC. Together, as we seek God through the teachings of Jesus and guided by the Spirit in prayer, let us continue to surrender, so we may truly thrive!!

May it be so! Amen!!!