

“Who’s Getting Younger?”
October 28, 2007

Luke 18:9-14
Joel 2:26-29

Two or three months ago, a local woman sent me some information about a national faith and justice program that provides what sounds like a powerful, transformative group experience. She was hoping to get a group started in Sonoma and wanted to let me know about it. She also wanted my help in increasing the attendance at the program’s kickoff event one Saturday. She had a specific request, and I will never forget how she worded it. “Please,” she wrote, “assign two members of your congregation to attend this workshop.” ... “Please *assign* two members.”

As I sat at my desk and read those words, I slipped into my native Southern tongue and whispered, “Oh, honey. You have no idea! I can’t do that here. This ain’t that kind of church! This ain’t the kind of church where I can ‘*assign*’ anybody to do anything.”

This *isn’t* the kind of church where the minister can tell two people what they’re going to do or where they’re going to spend their Saturday. This is the United Church of Christ, and in the UCC ministers do not usually have the power to issue edicts that church members will actually follow.

In general, I think this is a good thing. I’ve never had much interest in being a dictator, and I am sure that I’m not the only one here who doesn’t like being told what to do. Even with all our diversity and differences, I think we’d probably all agree: we’d like to keep the tradition of not hearing edicts from the pulpit.

But ... every once in a while. Every once in a while, an edict crosses my mind, and, instead of floating off into thin air, it starts to take root. And there’s one that has recently taken root so deeply that I simply *must* put it before you this morning.

Here’s my pastoral edict, my ministerial fiat: I am banning the phrase “get younger” in our congregational conversations. When we’re talking about our hopes for the future and our sense of God’s call in our congregational life, I prohibit us from saying that what we want is the congregation to “get younger.”

I have at least two objections to this phrase. One is I think it suggests that there is something wrong with who we are. It suggests that who we are is a problem and that the solution is to “get younger.” By using this phrase, we seem to be saying that we are too old. And if we’re saying that, then we are, in effect, telling Jim, for instance, “Jim, you’re 100. I’m sorry, but that makes you too old.” Or we’re saying, to one of our Ruths and another of our Jims, “You all are 90, so you’re too old, too.” And to those of you who are 80 and above: “Well, you know the score. You’re way too old, too.”

I realize that this is probably not what any one of us *means*. But when we look at ourselves as a congregation and then decide that we need to “get younger,” we are much too close to saying to the members of the church who are not considered “young,” that what the congregation doesn’t want is more people like “them.” And if we’re saying that, intentionally or unintentionally, God help us!

Being “old” is not a problem. It is not a deficiency or a spiritual shortcoming. Your age and mine are not problems that should be addressed by “getting younger.”

Who we are as a congregation is not a *problem* we need to solve by “getting younger.” *But ... but* who we are is incomplete. What we are and always will be is incomplete, because who and what we are is always in process. We are always in the process of *becoming*. Who we are is not a problem. Who we are is a community of people whom God is always calling to become a *fuller* and *more faithful* people of God.

This reality of God’s steady call in our life together takes me back to my other objection to our telling ourselves that we need to get younger. Even if we reject the idea that who we are is a problem and we begin instead with thinking of ourselves as incomplete and in need of attracting younger members – even if we reframe discussion in that way – we’re still focused on ourselves. We’re looking at *ourselves*, sizing *ourselves* up, and identifying an age group that’s missing. Then, we’re developing *our* strategies for attracting people in that age group to join us here. And if that’s what we’re doing, if that’s our approach, “young people” aren’t the only things that are missing. What’s also missing is God. Our focus on who God is calling us to be and where *God* is calling us to go is missing. Our openness and attentiveness to holy guidance and amazing grace are missing.

So let us come together to focus first on the Spirit of God in our midst. Think about your experiences here. Think about your relationships; the different kinds of work and play you do here; your hopes, your dreams, your disappointments here. What happens here that is truly of God? Where and how do you experience the Spirit’s presence? What do you believe God is asking of you and this congregation? What is the gospel – the good news – that God in Christ giving the world through this church? How can we tell if we are faithfully living and sharing the good news of God’s healing work in the world?

The prophet Joel has given us one vision of what a community looks like when the Spirit is fully present. It is a vision of what ancient Israel called the “Day of the Lord,” the day when the earth and everything in it are filled with the glory and grace of the Spirit of God.

Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your old men (and old women) shall dream dreams.

Your young men (and young women) shall see visions.

Even on the male and female slaves (even on those you consider as the least
among you), I will pour out my spirit.

Here is God’s call and challenge to this congregation: to be a church where sons and daughters speak the word of God, where old men and old women share their dreams, where young men and young women see and trust visions of a better world, and where men and women who have been abused, misused, and cast aside are welcomed and loved as bearers of the Holy Spirit.

God is not calling this congregation to get younger. God is calling this congregation to become a community where the young and the old, the privileged and the poor discover the Spirit of God at work in themselves and in each other. God is calling this congregation to become a community where the dreams of the old and the visions of the young are intertwined and interdependent, where the dreams and visions inform and enliven each other. God is calling this congregation to become a community where the young, the old, and everyone in between are transformed by the gospel – the gospel of a

God whose love brushes aside human divisions and whose call to do justice and to love mercy is a call that each and every one of us embraces.

So how in the world do we become that community? Well, for one thing, we need to pray; we need to open ourselves, day in and day out, to God's unpredictable grace and guidance. We need to listen for the whispers of the Spirit in our own hearts and to share what we hear. We need to have confidence that the Spirit will guide us along a faithful, fruitful path, even when we can't see where that path is leading us.

Over the last couple of months, the lay leaders of this congregation, the committee members you appointed last January, have been praying, listening, and sharing their sense of what God is asking us to do. They have been dreaming dreams and seeing visions ... and then they've been translating those dreams and visions into something as mundane as a budget. But even in a mundane budget, they are still beautiful dreams and glorious visions. These dreams and visions include strengthening the ministry we have with the children who are here and with those who are to come. They include enlivening our worship services with new music and liturgical drama and strengthening our ties with our brothers and sisters throughout the United Church of Christ as we all seek to respond to God's call in our life together. And, of course, those dreams and visions include paying for the increases in the church's property tax and water bills.

As you already know, this is Stewardship Sunday, so it's no coincidence that I'm talking about budgets, dreams, and bills. This is the Sunday when we have the opportunity to make our financial commitments to this church and its work for the upcoming year.

There may be a few more changes to the proposed budget when the Church Council meets this week, but, as it stands now, the budget that would support the immediate dreams of this congregation calls for an increase in our total pledges of about 14%. My beloved brothers and sisters, we can meet this goal. This is Mission: Possible.

If you are a member of this church, but you have not pledged in the past, this is a good time to start. If you are a pledging member of this church but do not tithe – if you do not give 10% of your income to God's work in the world – this is a good time to embrace that as your goal. To move toward tithing, consider increasing your pledge by 2% of your income if you currently give less than 5%, and consider increasing your pledge by 1% of your income if you currently give more than 5%.

All this talk of money and percentages takes me back to the subject of pastoral edicts and ministerial fiats. As I said earlier, this is not a church in which dictates from the pulpit go over very well. Some congregations and some ministers require church members to tithe, at a minimum; we and I do not. I think this is a good and faithful thing, because, in its lack of coercion, it reflects our relationship with God. The Spirit of Life and Love does not *demand* that we give of ourselves and our financial resources; the Spirit *invites* us to give.

God invites us to discover the transformative joy of participating in God's work in and through this church. God invites us to join in the healing, loving, reconciling work of the Spirit. God invites us to share the love and grace we encounter here with a world that desperately needs both. If we participated in God's work in the world simply because God commanded it, I don't think we'd ever see beauty of what God accomplishes through us, and, oh, what a loss that would be.

My beloved friends, in this year and the coming year, let us give, not because we are enjoined, commanded, or required. Let us give because we are invited ... invited to be God's people of peace, of generosity, and of hope. Amen.

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