

"The Paradox of Organized Religion"

The Paradox of Organized Religion
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Psalm 62: 5-12; Mark 1: 14-20
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Have you read our Annual Report? Notice anything in the Nominating Committee Report?

There is a lot of white space--empty slots in leadership positions and on a few Boards.

Now, of course, this has been a cause for concern on my part and on the part of Council members and Boards. *What's going on*, some people have asked. You know as well as I do the different reasons why we say no to some things and yes to others in any given year. In any church, the availability of people to work in particular ministries fluctuates from year to year. As we heard the psalmist pray this morning, let us trust in God at all times and pour out our hearts before the one who provides us with strength and faithful love.

This past week, I was drawn back more than once to that white space, that emptiness that at first seemed troublesome. So I decided to sit and look at it and reflect (And you wondered what pastors do all week long, didn't you?). As I softened my gaze, the white space expanded and deepened, drawing me in, kind of like Alice and the rabbit hole!

First I remembered something that I have told you before, the words of one of my seminary professors who asked the class to open our Bibles and talk about the white space. Huh? This professor was in his last year before retirement and was very grouchy. He kept saying—"the white space, you know, the empty space in the margins, around the words and letters, what about the white space???" Of course we all felt like complete idiots, but none of us had any idea what he was getting at.

The white space is probably the most important part of the Bible, he said, more important than the words, for it is in that space that the Holy Spirit dwells and moves. You read a few words or verses, and pause in order to enter that space between words or in the margins, in order to hear what the Spirit may be saying to you in that particular moment. It is the white space that transforms the printed words into the living word of God that interacts with us, the readers. The white space is where we encounter the breath of God, in a whisper, a thundering cry or the sheer sound of silence.

The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news! Lots of space around these printed words.

People say that the written texts of our lives are sacred, for they reflect our stories and challenges and joys. So, even though the Nominating Committee report isn't

the Bible, this past week, I choose to stay with the white space; I wandered and wondered and listened. And God does have a sense of humor. After hearing the voice of my seminary professor, I heard Moses. No, I'm not completely crazy! Last Sunday we had discussed Moses in Confirmation class, so I figure that he God was working through that. Moses said:

You think that you have problems! All alone with God, I had to write on stone tablets, and lug them down the mountain. Then I got so mad at the fickle people, that I smashed the tablets! So I had to climb up and do it all over again, and no one volunteered to help me!

Well, a good laugh always helps to put things in perspective!

Then, I heard words from my namesake, who is often with me. *Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you live, so shall I live. Your people will be my people. And your God will be my God too.*

I said thanks to Ruth for coming to me in that space.

After a while, I got it! I repented, that is, I turned my perspective away from worry and negativity and lack of complete trust in God; I turned toward God and had a complete change of heart. This space is not blank, dead emptiness, it doesn't signify scarcity, far from it.! It's an incredible gift that offers the abundance of endless possibilities! It's the kind of emptiness over which God's Spirit moved and brooded at the beginning of creation in the book of Genesis. Fertile space out of which all kinds of ideas and actions and words can emerge, things that we consider impossible spring forth and begin to take shape, each of us and all of us together choosing which possibilities resound with our hearts, which ideas ignite the Spirit within us.

Don't panic, but imagine just for a moment a church without a moderator, vice moderator or financial secretary. Go even further, imagine a church without boards or committees.

Feel that empty space as wonderfully open and pregnant with possibility, a clean slate as it were, where new ideas start bubbling and catching on and you say—*how about this?* And you over there say: *Yes, that makes me think of* And then another person says: *Well, this may connect the two together.* And God's Spirit is springing up all over the place—the more chaotic the better, like that first Pentecost! And just like those first Christians discussing over and over again how they would carry out God's mission in the world.

Now, before you start wondering if you should renew my contract this morning, let me reassure you by saying that I am NOT suggesting that we get rid of leadership positions or Boards. No, in fact, in a little while, after lunch, we will be filling in some of that white space with names. I trust in God and in our current Boards that all will be well.

No, what I am inviting you to do this morning and in the coming months, is to visit and revisit this white space with me, to look with new eyes and an active imagination at the ways in which we are carrying out our ministries for the sake of God's kingdom. This is a good thing to do every few years.

You see, the words "organized religion" is really a paradox, or an oxymoron. Perhaps it would be clearer if I said: "organized faith" or "organized spirituality," because we are so used to viewing religion as the institution of the church. But religion is all about the Holy Spirit, or at least that's what started the followers of Jesus on this path. *Follow me and I will make you fishers of people.* Of course Jesus didn't say anything about buildings and committees and Robert's rules! Along with us, I bet the apostle Paul would have appreciated a little more guidance about such things!

The Spirit blows where it will. The Spirit is such that we cannot contain it, *our cups runneth over*, it interrupts and disturbs and disrupts our well-thought out plans. At the same time, as the early Christians soon discovered, a faith community can't get much done for God's kingdom if each person is doing his or her own thing without cooperation or guidelines.

What are we to do? Church life is a constant effort to keep the organization and the creative Spirit of God in balance, enough organization to get God's work done and enough space for the Spirit to stir and freshen the pot so that it keeps bubbling.

The time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God has drawn near. Repent and believe in the good news!

This morning, the good news is the white space and all that is to be discovered in that wondrously fertile space of God's Spirit. Questions have emerged from my own white space musings.

How are the ministries and mission of this church coinciding or overlapping with your passions and interests? The ministries of this church are shaped and reshaped by what you feel God is calling you to do, by what resounds with your heart and your life's purpose. Are there new ways in which God is calling us to work together with the dual purpose of serving others and making your hearts sing? Perhaps every space on the Nominating Committee's report is not meant to be filled with a name. What else might emerge out of that open space or how might we reshape that space?

The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near!

Here's one possibility. We could put two arrows in that space, one arrow leading out from a Board to somewhere in the local community. A new partnership with

people who want to do outreach, for example, but who don't go to church. One woman among us invited a friend from another church to teach Sunday school with her, and they did for the first trimester this year. What an amazing, Spirit-led gesture and willingness to do a new thing on the part of both women!

Another arrow might connect several of you with one of the Boards, not as a Board member but as someone who is willing to work with others on a particular event or task, or exciting project. It could be anything, from leading a movie night for youth to being in charge of the Quiet Bags in the back of the Sanctuary, from driving donated mittens and scarves to the right place to copying the Sunday bulletin once a month.

A few years ago, when we made some changes in our by-laws, the number of Board and Committees members was intentionally reduced. The objective is not to have fewer people do more work, but rather to engage more people in the congregation in the work of the church. In my understanding, Boards principally focus on planning, organizing, and calling people in the congregation to serve in some way through a particular ministry. Of course, Board members are usually passionate about both planning and doing, but when, for example, they plan events, they should not always be the ones leading them. The Boards offer to everyone a variety of ways to serve; they get the ball rolling and ask others to carry it on. That's my understanding of how things should work. What do you think? And how about Board and Committee meetings? Can't we look forward to Board meetings? Are they Spirit-filled as well as organized?

Ah, isn't this white space exciting? *Now is the time!*

Every single one of us is also called to be a fisher of people. It may seem easier at times to do things lone ranger style, but that's not what Christ's church is supposed to be all about. It's not even about doing church things only with church people. *Hey—I've agreed to serve at Bread & Roses or make lunch for the Confirmation class; would you go with me?*

It's all really quite simple. Right now, our church is blessed with lots of white space in which to wander and wonder, to imagine as the Spirit moves us and to serve as the Spirit urges us. *The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news!*

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Resources

Hotchkiss, Dan. *Governance and Ministry, Rethinking Board Leadership*. The Alban Institute. (Herndon, Virginia, 2009).

“No wonder “organized religion” is so difficult! The stability of a religious institutions is a necessary precondition to the instability religious transformation brings. The need to balance both sides of this paradox—the transforming power of

religion and the stabilizing power of organization—makes leading congregations a unique challenge” (p.1).

“The basic paradox of organized religion: how to create a stable institutional environment in which people’s lives will be transformed” (p.19).

See also p. 75-76 with regard to “swamped committees.”