

“The Contented Congregation”
July 31, 2022

Isaiah 40:28-31
Philippians 4:10-20

Paul writes to the early Christians in Philippi: “I have learned to be content.”

Many of us have not learned to be content—so I want to come back to those words in a few minutes.

In recent months, I’ve been thinking about and talking about our congregation as a “hybrid church.” And it seems good as I return from vacation and as we move toward the fall to reflect on this in a little more detail: to show you what I’m seeing, to learn from you how my vision might be improved, so that together we might continue as God’s new creation in these days.

A hybrid church is one that uses available technology so that it can meet in person *and* online. It is a congregation that recognizes the unique gifts found in each way of gathering. It is a congregation that receives and uses those gifts. And it is a congregation that seeks to make those gifts available to as many people as possible.

We meet in person because—well, in part because that’s what the church has been doing for 2000 years and what this congregation has been doing in this place for over 150 years. We are an incarnational people, affirming and even recognizing that the Spirit of God moves and acts in and among and between our bodies. We affirm and recognize that Christ’s church comes into being when we *congregate*.

So we bring ourselves to this place that we might worship *together*. We study and pray and talk and eat and work *together*. One of the most important events in the life of this congregation is called the annual *meeting*—a gathering together to give thanks for the past and look with hope to the future. All of this congregating is so important to us, so essential to who we are, that we will do it even when we have to wear masks and keep our distance.

Ah! The masks and the distance! They remind us every time we get together, for whatever purpose, that we have entered a new world, a new time, and that we will not be leaving this any time soon. Each week some “authority” hazards a guess as to how long this pandemic will continue, how long we’ll be masking and distancing. This past week, I heard three to five years. And I thought, “Well, that’s a long time. But I guess I—we—can do that.”

Then as I was girding myself up for this, I heard someone else say, “Forever.”

That’s a lot longer time. “Even youths,” the prophet Isaiah said, “will faint and be weary.”

In this new world, we also make use—good use—of the technology available to us. With John and Mark behind the cameras and now ensconced in the control room off of the balcony, we have adapted to online worship since the spring of 2020—much of the time it has been our only mode of worship. When we started gathering in person again last fall, we also started live streaming our worship. Board meetings have been held on Zoom and they often still are, eliminating the need to search for parking or even to leave home on a cold winter night. We started Zoom coffee hours and when “real” coffee hours resumed, some wanted to continue

online. We do that on the last Sunday of the month, so you can join us tonight at 7:00. And our Bible studies allow for people in Iowa and other states, people in Brazil and, soon, Canada, to gather and explore scripture together.

These are all wonderful occasions that we probably wouldn't have considered if not for this awful, ongoing pandemic. And we have found the Spirit of the living God strangely moving in and among and between us as we meet online.

We are a hybrid church, using the gifts of in-person and online gatherings, reaching out to one another and to the world in both ways. In doing so, we are discovering that this is not just a gimmick, just a survival method, but a valuable way of ministering to a broken and hurting world, making the joy and support of this community real in ways old and new.

As the fall approaches—beginning that time that we often call the “program year” I’m working with others so that we might bring back more in-person events as public health conditions warrant—gatherings such as Sunday morning adult education, the progressive dinner. We’re working to bring back more of the “before times” normalcy. As numbers go in the right direction we can sing more; I can lose this mask.

At the same time, we recognize that some are not ready to come back to worship in this sacred space, but they will continue to join us online, imbuing the space between us with its own sacredness. And we can continue to develop new ways of using our new technology, new ways of being hybrid.

Being a hybrid church allows us to receive many gifts and to extend multiple possibilities to a growing number of people. There is much good to be found in all of this.

As I was thinking about our hybrid church, I recalled Paul’s words to the Philippians about being content in various situations that we heard this morning. Or, I should say, I *kind of* recalled them.

I thought: “Didn’t Paul write something about learning to live in various circumstances? And what were they? Didn’t he write about being content with “this or that?”

After a little flipping through Paul’s letters and consulting a concordance, I came across the text that I was looking for: “I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and being in need.

I hadn’t remembered the context of those words. Paul was writing to the Philippians to thank them for the gift that they had sent to him. But I think that those words open up to us the opportunities that we have a hybrid church.

Plenty and want. Well-fed and hungry.

In person and online.

In all circumstances a kind of contentment is possible.

It doesn’t come right away, though, does it? Certainly, we can imagine being content in plenty and in being well-fed. We know the contentment that comes when we are able to gather in person—those in this sanctuary find it here this morning.

But how is one content in want, when hungry? What contentment is found where our contact is only virtual?

“I have learned,” Paul says. And learning, of course, takes time. Learning requires an openness to *not* knowing, an openness to discovering something new.

Listen closely. Paul speaks of learning the “secret” of living in various circumstances. His choice of that word suggests a revealing and a receiving—the discovering of something not readily apparent. Indeed, it suggests a wisdom that comes from outside of ourselves and our thinking—a wisdom that comes from God.

And this brings us closer to what we need as we go forward.

Paul is writing about a deeper spiritual understanding of how to live. We gain a clearer sense of our own way forward as we take the time to wait and watch and listen for what God seeks to teach us in these days. It is not a matter of going after what we want or grabbing for what we need. The secret is an openness to receiving what the living God offers us.

“I can do all things through the One who strengthens me,” Paul writes. Ultimately, this is what he has learned. Plenty and want, fullness and hunger can all be lived in and lived through—even profitably—when we have opened ourselves to the strength that God provides.

Centuries before Paul, the prophet Isaiah affirmed this reality: “Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted.” You know what he means, don’t you? This pandemic time can be like that for young and old alike. Reflecting on the testing and the precautions and the breakthrough infections, someone recently said to me: “This is all getting so tiresome.”

It is.

When in despair I am tempted to take those words as my new motto—and, believe me, that happens more often than I want to admit—I listen again to the invitation of Isaiah: “Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

As we wait in stillness before God our strength is renewed.

As our strength is renewed, we learn that we can indeed flourish in all kinds of situations and under all manner of circumstances.

In plenty and in want.

In person and online.

It is not either/or. We need not choose or value one over the other. It is both/and.

For each of us and all of us, then, in the days before us the calling is to enter more deeply into the life of this congregation and to enter more deeply into what God is doing in us and among us and between us in these days.

We need not rush.

We need not fear.

Let us be ready to learn—because there is still much we don’t know.

Let us be ready to receive the good gifts that are being offered to us.

Let us be ready to be good gifts to one another and to the world.

In this way we might renew our strength as a hybrid church and yet be the contented church as well.