

July 30, 2017

On the Mend: Healing What Ails Us “Healing Divisions”

Mark 9:38-41

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I heard a lecture this week by Sidney Blumenthal on the political atmosphere that gave way to Lincoln’s rise to the presidency. And it did not go by me, or any other person present – that history is repeating itself. Donald Trump looks a lot like Stephen Douglas. So, then where is our Abraham Lincoln? Will history repeat itself?

This scene from the life of Jesus with his disciples looks a whole lot like current day Church. Why? Because we are on the defensive, trying to stay alive, each in our own church, each in our own denomination.

And we are on the offensive too! Because, we know the best defense is a good offense.

So we wind up acting like they’re not one of us, even if we don’t say it. In doing so, we are not just making a statement that we are different from other churches. It goes much deeper than that, it can at times seep into: we are and can do it better, they don’t do it right, they’re wrong, shouldn’t trust them, they’re not being the Church, can’t count on them, - you should just stick with us. At worst, we bash them, and at best, we say or act like, we’re the only ones who have it right, can do it right, and can be trusted.

In our time, nearly every church and denomination I know has gone into survival mode. And part of that survival mode includes working hard to look different and stand out. And this strategy can wreck havoc and even obliterate cooperation, because it has at its’ core competition.

I know, that in our strategic planning process which took six months for us to discern where St. James should spend its time, energy and money for the next three years, we looked specifically at what we are doing and can do better than others. Yet, in the end, we focused not so much on the part about what makes us different and unique, but rather on what are the gaps in our community. In other words, what is not being done, that according to Jesus needs to be done. So we ended up with a focus this year on kids and reading and a soon to be pet therapy with four ladies with intellectual disabilities living in a group home in Springfield, a workshop for LGBT couples, cancer care package, and supportive and practical help for families dealing with addiction via a workshop we will offer this spring.

Some day I catch myself being scared and feeling desperate because we are a small church and we only have so many resources. Then, like putting cold water over my head, I say to myself, "You are not alone, and St. James is not alone." God has partnerships for us that we have not yet realized.

Take for instance, our food pantry. We started in a small closet just giving food to people we knew who needed it. Then, word began to spread and we got bold and began saying, "We are here for the community, and anyone who is hungry or food insecure can come to our church to get food. At our apex, we were providing groceries for 60 families.

Then, came along Hope United Methodist Church, who opened up a food bank one Saturday a month, and then a year or so after that came along Temple Lutheran Church offering another Saturday a month for those hungry and food insecure. And I began to think, "Oh no, will our partners give to them instead of us – yes, some did and do! We were an inspiration to

others. Now, they too are doing Christ's work and healing folks – as we do, in Jesus' name.

Churches are closing. We have seen it in our own town, as well as in nearby communities. Denominations are cutting staff. Everyone is trying to hold on. And in trying to do so, there has been a tendency to circle the wagons, guard what we are afraid to lose – our people and what we think are limited resources out there. The tendency is to become more competitive, and/or hoard. Yet, when we do that we see other Christians as our enemies, and at worst, flying monkey from the weird land of Oz trying to snatch up what we need and take it away.

I have to say, I am was impressed and inspired by our denomination's Conference Minister – the main man, the head honcho, (as bishop like as we get in the UCC), when he announced that our Conference will be starting conversations with the UCC Conference to our North, to see if it might be best for the Church (with a capital "C") to have our two conference join together. That impresses me. He made sure he was not a stumbling block. He stands to loss everything, even his job as Conference Minister and he moved here not long ago, to start his life over with us.

The irony of our faith is this - "The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, and , then giveth again. This is God's economy. So, in the case of the food pantry as an example, we now have partnerships with the Girl and Boy Scouts, teens needing community service for their college applications, and the newest, "Move for Hunger" is a partner with "Moving Solutions who collect food from moving companies when the people they are moving have food they do not plan to take with them to their new place. And as of this week, they have become a

partner with us. They came by with their first donations a few days ago, just the beginning of more to come.

We are currently maxed out regarding our congregation and the potential we have for coordinators for new programs and missions. We have our leadership fully involved in being coordinators of existing programs, and our congregation involved in assisting with those programs and missions. So, how then were we going to get a coordinator for our new work which I call in my head, "Our Ladies of South Croft (four women in their sixties and one in her seventies, who live in a group home run by Elwyn who have been relocated from main campus to a neighborhood in Springfield.". I feel God has put us in this situation, so we would look beyond our membership rolls. I feel like God laid on my heart someone who is not a member, and not even part of the United Church of Christ. She is recently retired, looking for something to do, and has had experience as a coordinator of programming, and has worked with folks with both intellectual and developmental disabilities.

It would be wrong of us to stand in the way of bringing healing to the ladies of South Croft because the miracle worker who God wanted did not wear our brand name across her chest or on her rear pocket. Jesus said to his disciples, "Anyone who give a cup of water in my name, will be rewarded. In his name, is whenever we love like Jesus loved and loves, whenever we stand beside someone who others have railed against, shunned or worst despised and ridiculed. This is what it means to move Jesus kingdom further along, so that it will be here, as much as it is in heaven. That's our job, nothing more, nothing less. And in doing that job Jesus put on our job description team work and cooperation as skills we must have!

So, as to live into God's instruction for us, even more, you will be getting a commitment card early this fall, in which you will be asked to think through the currency you have regarding relationships. Who in your circle, might like to partner with us in the missions and outreach we are doing? You will be asked questions like:

Who do you know who works in the food industry (restaurant, grocery store, meat factory or market, farmers market, CSA, farm, fast food industry, and drug store) that could possibly help our food pantry?

Who do you know who has a talent that could be shared with Our Ladies of South Croft, (when they come once a month to our church beginning to September to do an activity, get some pet therapy, and socialize with people who care about them, and recognize their lives matter, and that they can and do give, as well as receive).

Who do you know who has a dog, cat, or rabbit that might do well with children in pet therapy?

Who do you know that knits, crochets or sews as a hobby, (cause we are going to need more than we can currently produce, if we are going to include prayer shawls in our cancer care packages for those undergoing treatment)?

Who do you know who is in a family that is struggling with addiction?

Do you know any LGBT couples?

The currency of relationships seeks to bring dividends to others through the bonds we have formed. Being church is a team sport, both inside this arena and outside these walls— we must work together, count on everyone to be a part, and do their part alongside other partners and healers who God wants to use to further what needs to be done on this earth,

including working side by side with players from the other teams.

You can't play football with only the quarterback.

You can't play football, if you don't have other members on your team.

Yet, the best play to be had is done during the all star game. It is the best team out there – the best from all over.

That's the kind of team we are creating at St. James, especially in our new adventures. Consistory felt God was calling us to these new things, and in God's economy that would be more than possible. If amidst it all, we would remember this scripture, "John said to Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone who was driving out demons in your name, and we told him to stop, because he doesn't belong to our group, our band, he was not following us, and he was definitely not a part of our group. Jesus was not pleased. 'Don't stop him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down.'" If he's not an enemy, he is an ally. Jesus is asking us here, and now, in this text, and in this church, to recognize our allies.

Yet, if we are not intentionally careful, our desire for exclusive rights to the franchise, and name recognition can take over and before we know it, competition is in, and cooperation is out. Let us never be deaf to Jesus when he says, "Whoever is not against us is for us."

The factors that have led the church to its current state are complicated, and some of our feelings actually "spring from some very good sources, from loyalty, from confidence in the truth proclaimed, [and] the desire to keep it uncorrupted, from a strong sense of the need for unity in an organization. Yet, all

these “good sources” become hurtful when they hinder, rather than enable, God’s work in the world.

Thus, we must be open to and grateful for every partnership we have, no matter what name they go by and whose name is on their lips. For God’s truth and plan is -anyone who gives a cup of water, will be rewarded. As always, Jesus’ philosophy was broader than that of his followers – more welcoming and accommodating than initially imagined. For Jesus’ commitment was to oversee a generous, hospitable, and open kingdom. There is room here beyond the twelve, beyond us, and even beyond the “Church”. Thanks be to God. Amen and Amen.