

West Branch Friends Meeting
5-24-20
Sue McCracken, Pastor

“The Church, The Trees and Me”

I'm wondering what kind of response I would get if I asked each of you to list the different churches or places of worship you have ever attended on a somewhat regular basis. If you're my age, there might be several if you have lived in different places; or it could be like some of our faithful elders who attended the same church their entire lives. But it's often the case that if you are my age and you grew up in the church, being a part of a church community remains something you feel a desire to continue. As many of you know, I was raised in the Indianola Friends Church and was there 3-4 times each week (we got those attendance pins and bars each year if we hadn't missed any Sundays). There was always Sunday School, Worship, Youth Group, Evening Worship, and Thursday night Bible Studies. I was quite happy to graduate and head off to UNI and do away with all those 'boring' church services. But low and behold the choir director at the Cedar Falls Baptist Church had lived in Indianola and worked with my Mom for a few years before moving to Cedar Falls, and Mom contacted her, told her I liked to sing, and had her get in touch with me. (Mom may have been just a little worried that I would just skip going to any church while at college)! This director went out of her way to pick me up for rehearsals and then again on Sunday mornings, and I quite enjoyed singing in a large choir since that wasn't something we had at Indianola Friends.

Four years sped by quickly, college graduation came and went, and I ended up back in Indianola with a teaching job and back at Indianola Friends. But I also was part of a charismatic group, and I went to the Assembly of God Church most Sunday evenings. Not too much similarity between my Quakerly Indianola Friends and the Pentecostal Assembly of God, but I enjoyed the differences.

And you know the rest of my church experiences: married a Quaker and raised the family attending Pleasant Plain Friends, even doing some pastoral work there for a couple of years. After leaving the farm and marriage, I had a brief time checking out another Friends Meeting, and the local Methodist and

Presbyterian churches. But I was eventually encouraged by my mother-in-law to come back to Pleasant Plain Friends, which I did.

Then moving to Iowa City left me with new places of worship to explore: United Church of Christ, Presbyterian, Methodist (you can see, however, that I didn't get too radical with my exploration!) and I ended up attending St. Mark's Methodist just up the street from my condo, and with a choir to join once again. (Had I known WBF had such a fabulous choir, however, that might have gotten me back with you all a lot sooner)! So that's the 'church' history of my spiritual journey, but not my understanding of the differences between 'going to church' and 'being the church' which I have come to believe is the real task of believers.

What took me to this topic today was a walk I was on a few days ago, and my time observing the growth of the leaves on the various varieties of trees. All the maples were fully leafed out with no bare spots to see through. But then I noticed one, tall, mighty oak, just beginning to bud out and it even looked like it might be half dead. But I knew about oaks, and I knew they were just slower growing trees, and this huge oak must have been one of the already growing trees when that part of town was developed many years ago. And it instantly caused me to draw a parallel with my spiritual growth in the various churches I've attended, and the things I believe I've learned about our journeys in the spiritual world.

I was reading an essay by Dan Foster that was titled, "I Quit Church – Now I'm Closer to God," and, of course, it spiked my interest! Reading through his ten things he learned that led him to leave his church, it seemed like he just quit going to a church building, not realizing 'the church' isn't in the building! And it reminded me of my past views of church and the difference between 'going to church' and 'being the church'.

So here's what I learned from the trees. For many years I was like the maple: had those beliefs all developed: I was certain I knew who God was, what Jesus purpose was, and about the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But what I didn't know, was that I only had a few buds on my spiritual tree of life, and there were a LOT of bare spaces. So let me share some of the new growth that has developed over the last twenty years of my spiritual journey. Like Foster, I learned that we shouldn't outsource our faith. By that I mean not relying on a pastor or priest to tell us what to believe, but instead, to ask questions, spend

time in contemplation, read a wide variety of authors writing about spirituality (and not just the evangelical authors I only read as a younger adult). I actually think our Quaker ancestors already understood about growing spiritually while sitting in silence, listening for the spirit to speak rather than depending on a paid pastor or the Church of England's priest to tell them what to believe.

I also agree with Foster that God can be found outside the church walls. That seems like a no brainer to me now....the church is the people, not the building, and God can be found in all varieties of humans as well as in nature if we will just take a little time to look, listen, accept, and absorb.

Also, I finally realized Christianity wasn't the only religion with value – not the only one connected to the 'real God.' I've mentioned before how it took seeing Hindus and Muslims worshipping in the far east to realize their dedication to their faith was far deeper than anything I have ever felt or done for my Christian faith.

I also believe I've experienced growth in my understanding of scripture. I began reading books by progressive authors plus some former evangelicals – who are now atheists- that led to my understanding that the Bible is a collection of an ancient people's beliefs, their experiences with God as they conceived God to be, and a product of the culture, wars, and the times during which they were written. Pulling one verse out of the Bible and declaring you know 'the truth' is the maple tree all leafed out but still having only shallow roots, and as it ages, it becomes hollow and is an easy target for a strong wind.

These past few years I've learned that judgment seems to be a part of the understanding of many Christians. But true followers of Jesus need to study his life and teachings to realize his main focus was compassion, not judgment. He was always being judged by the religious leaders for hanging out with the local 'sinners,' and teaching the path of love for our enemies. Seems like his harshest criticisms were for the Jewish church leaders because they *weren't* being kind, compassionate, loving and caring for the most vulnerable; choosing to focus on making sure good Jews followed all the rules.

And finally, I developed an understanding that what I believe isn't nearly as important as what I do to love God and neighbors – the only two commandments Jesus taught as being the most important. In our recent time

with this pandemic, am I being 'the church' if I join a group of 'Christians' to protest our government leaders who are telling us to stay home because might believe only God has the right to tell me what I can and can't do? I don't think so. If I care for my older family member, or any person with health issues who might die if my actions cause them to become infected, I'm not following Jesus' teachings to love my neighbor as myself.

I've thought about those trees for days now and wondered which one I'm more like. Am I really that sturdy oak, sending roots deep to allow me to question beliefs and not lose my faith in the God I'm still trying to learn more about? Am I still growing by doing what I can to be the church – Am I:

- Protecting the environment,
- caring for the poor,
- forgiving often,
- rejecting racism,
- fighting for the powerless,
- sharing earthly and spiritual resources, embracing diversity,
- loving God and enjoying this life?

Because if I'm not being the church, then I might as well admit I'm still in the Maple tree stage of my spiritual life. But It's my desire to be the oak, and I'm still a young oak, wanting to grow in my understanding of God and life, putting down roots to hold me when doubts arise.

Wherever any of us happens to be on our spiritual journeys, I hope we're continuing to grow whether we're still leafing out and putting down deep roots, or we are that mighty oak who can weather any storm until our final days. No matter our current beliefs, the important task is just to be the church –doing whatever we can to bring the Kingdom of God to earth here and now.