

Things I've Learned in 20 Years
First Christian Church
Topeka, Kansas
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Scripture: Acts 20:17-22, 28-32,35

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How can it be 20 years. It seems like only yesterday when the McCollough family pulled into that steep driveway on Twilight Drive in two vehicles ... One 13 year old boy and a dog in one vehicle ... and 9 year old boy and a cat ... in the other. Our younger son was not keen on this move. He was leaving friends and familiar territory to inherit new and unexplored space. He was not excited. I remember telling Andrew that our house was basically across the street from the school where he would be attending ... and that they had a huge playground where he would be able to play football with his new found friends. We pulled into the drive and he told me straight up ... I don't like this house ... and I don't like the playground, and I want to go back to Chanute. He got out of the car ... and within an hour ... he had found a new best friend.

Transition is difficult. And the effect is systemic in families. But we discover we have a kind of resiliency ... a capacity for change far beyond our wildest expectations. That is true for individuals ... but it is also true for institutions ... like the church, believe it or not! Someone in one of the many groups here at the church suggested that it would be good to hear me share my feelings about these 20 years of ministry here at FCC Topeka. And the first scripture that came to my mind as I began this reflection ... were the words of Paul to his beloved church leaders in Ephesus as he departed from their territory to head back to Jerusalem before making his final missionary journey to Rome. Reading between the lines in that passage ... I hear lots of emotion ... a significant amount of ambivalence ... tears were being shed. One person made the observation in a letter I received this past week ... Pastors have the good fortune of being a part of the moments that define families -- birth, death, and all that connects the two. That's a good and accurate insight and the truth is ... sharing those experiences draws us into a close relationship. By the way ... that is why I won't be doing weddings and funerals after June 27. To do so would undermine the possibility for this kind of a growing, bonding relationship with your new pastor.

But back to the question ... and I have altered it just a bit ... what I want to talk about this morning ... is what I have learned ... in these 20 years. And let me tell you ... I have learned a LOT through serving in the capacity of Senior Minister for 20 years. So let me just share a few of those learnings. I think it will say a lot about how I feel as I prepare to make my departure from this position. SO here goes!

- Evolution happens. Even in Kansas! In the church, change is a given, and that reality will not change! Count on it. The first year I was in this position, the child care director asked if she could move the communion table off of the chancel for a program they were doing. She would make sure everything was back in place after the program was over. I said "Sure! Not a problem. Someone told me later that we really not in the habit of moving the Table around here. I have thought of that experience so often, and how it helped me to realize that one of the biggest tasks in the community of faith is to come to an understanding of what can change ... and what cannot change. We probably had more of these discussions at the time we established our

contemporary worship service over a decade ago. What are the things we have to make a part of a worship service. And what can change in an effort to reach out to people whose needs we were not meeting. Who would have ever guessed that First Christian of Topeka would be offering a worship service where people actually clap their hands while they are singing ... and where it is totally unsurprising to see a 3 year old dancing to the music up here on the front row. Yes. Evolution happens. Right here in Kansas.

- I have sharpened my understanding about what it is that holds a community of faith together. For many congregations out there today ... the prevailing mindset is that the thing that holds us together is the fact that we agree with each other on every minute detail ... social issues ... public policy ... and most assuredly on what the Bible says and how to use scripture. I'm sure many of you read the letter to the Editor this past week in the Capital Journal from the person who was accentuating the differences between Christianity and Islam ... and how her religious perspective was right and others were wrong. It's letter like that which bring about hostility between people ... rather than conversation that deepens understanding and the possibility of working together.

Charlotte and I are doing some major renovation at our house ... and we had a young carpet layer this week ... he's about 21 ... he had some tattoos and sagging pants with chains dangling here at there. He told me that he usually wore more chains and stuff, he said ... but the people who sold us the carpet told him to dress appropriately for this job. That the guy paying him is a pastor ... real religious guy. I hate it when Christian people get characterized as people with a mindset of exclusivism ... Who says I don't appreciate people with tattoos and chains! Who says he needed to wear something different when he was to come to my house! I love tattoos and chains. Who knows, once I retire ... I just might ... no, let that thought go. But here at FCC .. I have learned that "theological purity", or uniformity, or conformity to a certain set of beliefs is definitely NOT what holds us together! Indeed, the Disciples of Christ mantra has always been ... there is no creed by Christ. By that we have tried to underscore the reality that we can be theologically diverse ... view the authority of scripture from assorted positions, and we can in fact, be enriched by our diversity. So ... if it's not our theological purity that holds us together ... what is it that holds us together? It is the reality that we form community ... not around conformity but around practice. And by practice, I'm not just talking about working at Doorstep or serving needs at the Rescue Mission. Together we do hundreds of random acts of kindness in serving others ... but so do Kiwanians and Shriners and Optimists. The practice I am talking about ... is that which is centered in a deep sense of spirituality that dates back to the earliest Christians. We try to remind ourselves regularly ... that discipleship is marked by daily prayer, and worship ... and engaging ourselves in the ancient texts of our faith. It is marked serving others in the name of Jesus ... relating in Christian community ... and GIVING of our financial resources for the building of the kindom of God. And yes ... I did say KINDOM. It's a new word that I really like ... coined by Walter Wink ... stressing the inter-relatedness of God's people without resorting to the old word Kingdom that conjures up the picture of autocratic rulers and power.

So that is what I have learned. that it is possible to prosper and to flourish as a church ... even in the midst of significant theological and political diversity.

- We can honor the Great Christian tradition ... without adhering to traditionalism. Diana Butler Bass speaks to this in her book ... *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. When I read that letter to the editor this last week about the evil things that Islamic people have done through-out history ... I could only see in my mind the evil things that have been done in the name of Christianity! It's never fun to be reminded ... but it has been the tradition of the church to subjugate of women, to accommodate prejudices, and to even practice violence in the name of our co-called faith. In that sense, not many of us want to honor those "traditions". Butler Bass makes the observation that we need to distinguish between "traditionalism" and the time honored "great tradition". The latter includes "being a voice for peace and justice and beauty that emanates from the Christian soul;" (Butler Bass, p. 47
- **We can move from being immobilized by conflict.** I have learned these past 20 years that conflict is not a bad thing. In fact, I've been know to tell young couples in preparation for getting married ... you will have conflict. It's not healthy to think that you will always agree with each other on everything ... and that conflict is a bad thing. The issue is in how we deal with conflict. One of the first things we did together when I became your pastor in 1990 was to engage the leadership of the church in talking about the issues that had brought about conflict. We had a full day conflict utilization seminar led by one of our Associate Regional Ministers ... and we sat around circular tables and people had been instructed to list every conflict experience that had evolved in the congregation that they could remember. And to talk about those conflicts around the table. How they made you feel ... how they were handled What the conflict did to the church. We just talked and talked and talked. After an hour or so of conversation ... we heard outbursts of laughter from one group and then another. People were discovering some of the dimensions of conflict that ... looking at them in retrospect, seemed ludicrous. There is always a tendency in the church to try to pretend that conflict doesn't exist ... we sweep feelings under the rug, so to speak ... and try to pretend that everything is hunky-dory. I have learned that it is best to deal with conflict as expeditiously as possible and to use those occasions as possibilities for growth in our life together.
- I have learned that the church doesn't have to adopt the corporate model for doing business, but that our governance can be characterized as worshipful work. We don't just begin our Cabinet and Board meetings with a quick prayer to get us on to the big issues of the agenda. We make prayer a part of our decision making process .. the Moderator reads appropriate texts from the Moderator's Bible at each of our meetings... when all of our Ministry Teams were meeting on the same night in the month, we began our meets with 40 or more people gathered for a few moments of worship ... and then each Ministry Team chair took a candle with them to sit in the midst of their meeting room ... to remind them of the call to seek to discern God's will in the decisions we make. It is possible to allow the spirit to shape us ... even in business meetings.
- Finally ... I have learned that the church can move into the future ... even in the midst of the worst of economic times and we can ... Build UP ... and Build on. I remember so clearly at one of our building meetings ... it was like October or November of 2008 ... when the country's economic news was so devastating ... I asked our committee ... do we need to put this major construction project on the back burner until the economic condition of the country looks better? And if looks could have killed! I got stares from more than one person around the table. And one person said ... "NO ... this is not going on the back burner."

Someone else said ... "It's been on the back burner long enough." And the meeting proceeded ... and so did our project. And while I don't have the figures to prove it ... my guess is ... while this country has been going through a recession that some say is the worst since the Great Depression ... my guess is 2009 was the biggest financial year in the history of First Christian ... between our General Fund and our capital campaign funds. I'm sure there are many more things I have learned in these twenty years as we have lived out our commitment to discipleship together. And maybe the most important thing that I have come to reaffirm is that you and I have yet to arrive at our destination. We have yet to learn everything there is to know. Walking the walk of discipleship is best described as a pilgrimage ... as one of our Sunday School classes says each Sunday morning at the conclusion of their time together.... "We are seekers of the truth ... in love and understanding." I think that goes for all of us. We are here, not because we know all the answers ... but because we are on a quest ... a journey ... a pilgrimage. And when you don't know all of the answers ... it just feels good to be in community ... with a bunch of other seekers.

Thanks be to God for the church. And thanks for your part in helping me to learn some pretty great things in this past 20 years!

Amen.