

Again and Again: We are Reformed

Every four years in the United Methodist Church we have our General Conference. This is the conference where church law is made, amended and placed into our Book of Discipline. People from around the world come as delegates, an equal number of clergy and laity. In 2004, the General Conference was in Pittsburgh. It was a time where, once again, sexuality was up for discussion.

There was a regularly scheduled communion at every lunch break in the plenary hall at General Conference. On the day the votes went badly yet again for LGBTQ people, it was decided that LGBTQ delegates, allies and guests would attend that communion service, where they could stand in the presence of the broken and resurrected Body of Christ. They did this as a means of re-asserting their presence in that Body. They did it as a means of resistance against the false institutional proclamation of one cup, one body, and one baptism, where clearly the actions of the General Conference actively sought to harm and exclude members of that Body.

All forms of their resistance and disruption were embodied statements that the unity of the church cannot continue to come at the cost of LGBTQ lives. These same acts of resistance are theological affirmations that the resurrected Jesus lives on in their whole and beloved queer bodies.

There was weeping and there was anger at communion. There was a need for a deep and spiritual release of the violence that had just been done to the queer body of Christ. Because when votes are cast against the very existence of LGBTQ lives, that is what happens: violence, Christ's body crucified again. To not act in the face of such violence does further violence.

When the sacrament was over, Rev. James Preston grabbed a chalice from the communion altar and smashed it on the floor. The smashing of the chalice was not a planned disruption. Where there are many interpretations of that moment of breaking the chalice, in fact, there was no chaos, no storming the altar, no desecration of the sacrament. There was a holy anger that took shape in a prophetic act. A movement of the Spirit interceded to express anguished sighs too deep for words.

Bishop Donald Ott, presiding over the communion, was distraught by the destruction of the cup. He got down on the floor and stared gathering up the pieces. Others joined him in the gathering.

Rev. Paul Perez and Chip Aldredge the Admissions Director of Wesley Theological Seminary joined the Bishop in gathering the pieces of the broken chalice. They placed the shards into their hands and carried them to the altar.

In our gospel for today, Jesus says "If a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it will bear much fruit."

Now the seed doesn't exactly die, but it does stop being a seed. It becomes, underground, in the cold, something new. A seed dies to its old life so that it may transform itself into a plant.

Caterpillars spin cocoons and live in them, almost like tombs, until they are able to die to their old selves and be reborn as something new and beautiful.

Jesus says, If a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it's just a grain of wheat – a single seed – forever. It will blow away or be eaten and its usefulness is finished. But if that grain of wheat is planted, if it spends time underground, well, then it will become an entire plant.

Some things have to die so that new things can be born.

Rev. T. Denise Anderson in her commentary on our gospel for today says “The year 2020 will be remembered as one of pestilence, pressure and protest. Even as a global pandemic disproportionately affected marginalized people. Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and others joined the already long litany of Black lives lost to police violence and the imaginations of armed civilians. Everything was changing, but too much remained the same. The unrest was almost constant.

Consider then what must have been brewing in Jerusalem the week Jesus was crucified. Our reading for today jumps ahead to that week and the moments after Jesus' protest march into Jerusalem which we will talk about next week in our parking lot. Imagine that the air is charged as an occupied people remember God's liberation of their ancestors from another empire. They're aware of Jesus' wonders and are anxious for restoration.

Jesus telegraphs his vision. In order for the seed to bear fruit, it must die. Those who follow him must go where he goes. Whoever tries to retain their life will ultimately lose it. This is troubling because the Messiah was expected to live forever. Jesus is again defying expectations. But for those who were worried, a voice from heaven confirms Jesus' identity.

Change, even when welcomed, means death. Again and again we are being reformed. The process is uncomfortable, but the status quo is untenable. When change happens to us, what could possibly take root and flourish?

Think about it. If you were to take a piece of paper and make a list of everything that creates or maintains the status quo of our church, our community, our society, etc. and then take a separate sheet of paper and make a list of things that disrupt or dismantle the status quo. And if we were then to look at those two separate sheets, where would we see the Spirit at work? In the status quo or the things that disrupt and dismantle the status quo?

The best selling author Glennon Doyle has spoken frequently in public about her struggles with an eating disorder, with addiction and about her time spent in a mental hospital as a teenager. She writes this: “You can be shattered, and then you can put yourself back together piece by piece. In the process, you may wake up one day and realize that you have put yourself back together completely differently. That you are whole, finally, and strong, but that you are a different shape. This type of change is what occurs when you sit inside your own pain and it's revolutionary. When you let your old self die, there is suddenly one day new life. First the pain, then the rising.”

Look at this picture. This is what was left of the chalice on that fateful day in 2004 in Pittsburgh. The worship leader reported that the chalice had been a personal gift with great sentimental value. The cup, reassembled and held together by a jagged superstructure of wire, was returned to the altar. It became a symbol for the 2004 General Conference.

In her book, "The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why" author and religion professor Phyliss Tickle asserts that about every 500 years, the Church goes through a "giant rummage sale" – a time of rapid reformation in which many cultural and religious practices get reconsidered and tossed out. That places us in the midst of a contemporary reformation. Imagine it is 500 years from now. What will historians say about the time we are in right now? What do you imagine religious practice will look like 50, 100, 500 years from now?

In our denomination, there is a seed dying and rebirth occurring. What it will look like we don't exactly know right now. There is talk of a Global Methodist Church which would be the conservative church and the Liberation Methodist Connection, which is more liberal approach to church, and perhaps the United Methodist Church will remain as somewhere in the middle.

I don't know what it will look like but I know something has to die so that something new can be reborn.

And what about us at Central United Methodist Church? Think about how we have been anything but status quo during this time of racial unrest and global pandemic.

We have moved on to zoom, it's not a polished, edited version of a worship service, but it is who we are and we are community and a little bit of chaos is where we find ourselves at home.

Meetings have moved to zoom, and the leaders of the church like not having to drive downtown when they can just turn on their computers and not fight traffic!

We have connected with those who can't attend our zoom meetings by writing them cards and notes and surprising them on their front lawns.

And we are in the midst of a development plan that will cause some things to have to die in order for new things to be born. That's scary but I believe that status quo is even scarier.

If we die to some things, think of the new ministries that will be born, to work alongside those amazing ministries we already house at Central.

Let me close with a poem by Rev. Sarah Are entitled "Keep Digging".

I can feel change inside of me
It's a slow burn
Change usually starts out hot –
Defensive and angry,
A self-righteous blanket
Of, "I am right and here's why
I wrap it around my shoulders
Like a barricade

I fight the temptation to lean forward,
To play the challenger,
To argue with confidence.

But in time,
Almost always,
The heat fades,
The air leaves the balloon.
The audacity of it all
Starts to wear off,
And eventually,
What I am left with
Is myself
And a big, open sky.
It's colder here.
It's quieter
I can hear my thoughts.

And in this big, wide openness.
I am able to say out loud,
"Maybe I wasn't right.
Maybe I need to learn.
Maybe it's time for change.
Maybe that's okay."

And if I'm quiet, and if I'm paying attention,
I can usually hear God whisper inside of me,
"Good work, my child. Now keep digging." Amen.