

Should We Go Down With the Ship?

Colleagues,

This week's ThTh comes from Robin Morgan. With her dissertation done, Robin's waiting for the next commencement ceremony at St. Louis University to get that doctor's hood draped over her shoulders. For now she's interim pastor at Peace Lutheran Church in Washington, Missouri. Robin's a theologian-pastor, as you have seen from her previous posts on this site. What comes today shows more of the same. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I've been thinking about the malaise, the fear of loss and shallow in-fighting that seems to be the normal course of events these days in our congregations. Some people chastise me for being so negative. They insist that if I just "accentuated the positive" I could be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. Maybe. But after they spend a few minutes highlighting all the great things the church does, they lapse back into the "don't rock the boat, Delores will leave the congregation if we move that planter" mentality that keeps us all frustrated and exhausted, but still unwilling to change. The people who confuse me the most are the leaders. When I go to conferences and workshops, I listen to their presentations, hear them talking between sessions and these people know what the organizational problems are AND what direction we need to go to solve them. However, because we/they also know that

“Delores will leave the congregation if we move that planter,” we/they scale back what we/they know needs to be done until all we’re doing is celebrating the fact that Delores’ grandmother gave the planter to the congregation seventy years ago.

On one hand, I know these leaders genuinely care about the people they serve and choose to meet them where they are, loving them and walking with them as best they can. On the other hand, when I’m feeling less generous, I figure it’s a matter of money. God forbid Delores pull her money and maybe even sabotage her grandparents’ endowment, which the congregation is now using, bit by bit, for operational expenses.

Now I’m thinking that maybe there’s a third alternative at work. Maybe it’s deeper than either of these options. Maybe there’s a deep sense of shame at work on our leaders. These huge organizations that our grandfathers and grandmothers built are crumbling in our hands. Immigrants, many of whom came to this country with nothing but the clothes on their backs and the will to give a better life to their children, built these organizations and now we, their wealthy, well-educated descendants, can’t keep enough money in the coffers to get the roof fixed much less be in mission to the world.

The shame of this failure is not spoken of among us. We celebrate the past, we honor our forebears, because they deserve it, but also because we don’t know what else to do. The leaders know that to be about mission in today’s world the structures we hold so dear will be drastically changed. Not only the planter, but the building it has stood in for seventy years may have to go or be transformed as we meet the chaos of the world where it is. In the process, we will be changed forever into a community we no longer recognize.

This shame (not just guilt that regrets some behavior or action, but shame that essentially in the core of our beings we are fatally flawed) has paralyzed us. As leaders, though we don't articulate it, we seem to have largely decided to go down with the ship of our denomination. We know that the baby steps we are taking with our people will not get us where we need to go before the doors have to be closed, the building sold and our name taken off the sign outside. We know that. But because of this shame, our unwillingness or inability to act as we know God is calling us to act, we sit and celebrate the past, knowing full well that there will be no future. But we are "faithful." We will go down with the ship.

Isn't that the ultimate negation of what we're supposedly about, speaking of not accentuating the positive? Is there really no hope in this picture at all?

First, we need to acknowledge that the fatal flaw that the leaders are ashamed of is, indeed, a fatal flaw. However, it's not just the fatal flaw of the leaders, it's the flaw of us all. We have turned our grandparents and our traditions into the gods we worship, no matter how many times we give lip service to Jesus. And we are reaping the consequences of our idolatry. The Creator will only endure such idolatry for so long, calling us to repent. Eventually, if we refuse and stay turned to our false gods, the Creator will leave us to them. That certainly seems to be the case today as congregation after congregation slowly slips into oblivion.

Second, there is something we can do even in the midst of the chaos that we assume will swamp our lives if we turn away from focusing on our inherited organizations and turn back to focusing on God. We can get down on our knees and pray a simple prayer, "You're in control and I'm not." That's not easy for people who have been groomed from birth to be in charge of

everything and everyone in their lives. For those of us who haven't had such illusions of control, our temptation is to manipulate worldly power to get "our fair share." Either way, the prayer is, "You're in control and I'm not."

The fatal flaw is still there, the chaos is coming, but even in the middle of this whirlwind of uncertainty, we are not alone. Jesus stands with us, has taken our fatal flaw onto Himself along with our shame and idolatry. He allowed Himself to be nailed to the cross with our sin, so that we could have new life with God through Him. We are no better than we were before, but we have been claimed by the Pilot of our Souls, the Anchor of Salvation, the Rock of Ages who is our True Tradition. The ship of the church is not going down because the head of the church is alive and well, sending His spirit into the world to blow us into new ports and into new shipping lanes for the old ports.

Listen to Columba who left Ireland and his home to sail across the ocean to Iona off the coast of Scotland. There he speaks as a believer who left his family and traditions to venture into the unknown to be in mission to the world:

Alone with none but Thee, my God,
I journeyed on my way:
What need I fear, when Thou art near
O King of night and day?
More safe am I within Thy hand
Than if a host did round me stand. The child of God can fear
no ill,
His chosen dread no foe:
We leave our fate to Thee, and wait
Thy bidding when to go.
'Tis not from chance our comfort springs,
Thou art our trust, O King of kings.

We wait and we go as God bids us. How will the organizations we have inherited fare in the storms ahead? Only God knows. Regardless of the circumstances of our lives, as chaotic and risky as they may be, our comfort is not lost as our traditions are re-made to again be in service to the world. Our Lord, our Jesus goes with us, wherever He may lead us.

Robin J. Morgan