

Why We Come to Church
Year B, Pentecost 17, 9/20/15
Rev. Laura Ruth Jarrett
Hope Central Church

Welcome all you visitors, we're so glad to have you with us. We set a goal for ourselves that we would ask you, whom we love, you whom we care about to come to church with us because we wanted you to share some of what we experience here at Hope Central.

For many of us, arriving upon these shores, Hope Central Church has been a haven - We have come from situations and congregations that may or may not have nurtured us. But we steered our boats toward Hope Central because we have hoped and have worked to make Hope Central a place of radical welcome.

Hardly any of us, and I'd say only one of us, Betty Wiles, belongs to this church because it was the church of our parents. Betty, who is now 100 came here because their family were members here. We do pray that our congregation is such a spiritually deep place, a nurturing place, a truthful authentic expression of the longing for God, a place to make meaning, and a center for the repair of the world that our children will be, with Betty, legacy members of Hope Central.

Hardly any of us come to this church because we long to make successful business connections or find golfing partners, except perhaps for Cheryl Raiche and Beth Chandler.

I'd say that none of us are here because we have an orthodox or fundamentalist theology unless you call progressive christianity its own kind of fundamentalism - intolerance of republicans and clear and certain ideas of who should be included which means everyone except those who don't agree with us. We repent of this nearly every Sunday because we long to know the different ways God calls to her people.

What we do have here is a bunch of mess up people - victims, alcoholics, survivors, people who are broke, and running up debts on credit cards, folks with issues around mental and physical health. What we have here are racists and folks who suffer from internalized homophobia and homophobes and people who suffer from internalized racism. We have people here who are scared everyday of their lives and folks whose daredevil behavior mask deep insecurities. We have people here who live with cancer and chronic pain, who are in 12 step programs and have relapses.

We worship in a building we're not sure we like having because the tenants are cranky, the new furnace cost a lot of money but we haven't known how to pay for it and we're sick of being asked.

We are a people who are cranky with each other, pissing each other off. We are people who left other places because they were intolerable and found that we brought that intolerability in the door with us. We're a people who are putting the clergy on a pedestal and pulling their asses off because who do they think they are.

We are a people who want so much - and are so exhausted. We are a people who want to be in community, to be there for each other, and are so busy, it's hard drop off a pizza or sit with an elder for an hour.

We're a congregation who wants and expects great worship, but complain about the sermon, the music, the offering testimony, the communion, the length of the prayers, the language, the children - but still we love it.

We're a people who want things done they way they have always been done for the last two years or 10, and still would like the congregation to be creative and innovative.

We're a congregation who scorn pretension and preciousness, and at the same time, are thrilled to have been mentioned in the New York Times today because Abbi and Laura got married here three weeks ago.

In short, we invited you here because we think you might be like us. We invited you here someone here loves you, thinks you love them, and wanted you to experience what it is here at Hope Central that saves our lives, i.e.. the grace of God, good music, a place for our children. We wanted you to be with us because we have found a spiritual practice that involves the life and teaching of Jesus for it's own sake, and because it helps us get sober, be kinder, protect the children, make a stake in ending the war of the slaughter of people of color and the queer folks and those who have been bullied and those who are starving, and those who crossing borders so to escape the violence of home and nation. We invited you here because we have found that we are the kind of people Jesus might have hung out with.

It's not easy here at Hope Central, it's not just three verses of a beautiful song led by Vanessa and the band - though there is that every week. It is far more messy than that. We're just coming into our growth, just learning how to do large project, just beginning to understand how, as it concerns the work of justice in our neighborhood, we need to do more than just have a good idea. we need to do something.

Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, communities in France, Holland, and in the US who lives with and nurtures the lives of people with mental and physical disabilities said this about community and I mean it to describe our congregation:

“Community is the place where our limitations, our fears and our egotism are revealed to us. We discover our poverty and our weaknesses, our inability to get on with some people, our mental and emotional blocks, our affective and sexual disturbances, our seemingly insatiable desires, our frustrations and jealousies, our hatred and our wish to destroy. While we are alone, we could believe we loved everyone. Now that we are with others, living with them all the time, we realise how incapable we are of loving, how much we deny to others, how closed in on ourselves we are.”*

Yes, this describes us and yes, this is our messy work. We have come here to dare to know about ourselves, to heal so that we might be more like Christ, so that we may enter into enlightenment, so that we and others may live long enough, with the help of community so to enter the place of serenity in this life and if there is a next life, there, too.

Our congregation is not a hospital or group therapy or a 12 step program or a family though some of us like to say we are. We are a dance hall for the Spirit, a dinner table for the spiritually hungry, a singing group of people that might be a combination of the Four Tops, Nina Simone, the Pointer Sisters, the Indigo Girls, Bill Monroe, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir’s sings great hymns. We are a school of the heart and teacher of children. We are ones who want to see the golden light of Christ on Sunday mornings and evening, and also Tuesday afternoon when we are stuck in traffic.

We are a people who are not trying to be the greatest, not trying to skip over the hard parts of being human and being together. We are a people who are learning to follow the wisdom and the glory of being like the lowest servant - not because we’re trying to deny our privilege, our riches, our first world problems, but because we believe one who must serve at the table, the lowliest of all servants in Jesus time knows something that is imperative for our growing into the world God wants for us.

To quote Trudy Smith from the magazine Relavant’s blog** post last week,

“I realized that church was not a place to go because everyone had their act together. It was more like a refuge where all sorts of people could gather to remind each other of the story we are all in.

to quote her again: I’ve slowly learned that going to church can be about something other than moral requirement, fear of punishment, social connection, getting spiritually fed, or even looking for likeminded people with whom to pursue justice in the world. Going to church can be about holding this space in which to experience the grace of God together, learn together, fail and forgive and stumble forward together.”

Finally to quote the Pastrix, Nadia Bolz-Weber, pastor and founder of The House for All Sinners and Saints, “[Our] job is to point to Christ and to preach the Gospel and to remind people that they're absolutely loved ... and all of their mess-ups are not more powerful than God's mercy.” ***

We are a messy bunch, bound and committed to spiritual health that includes the healing of our bodies and souls. We're so glad you came today and we hope you'll come again.

Welcome to Hope Central Church, beloved,
Welcome to all who have no church home,
want to follow Christ, have doubts and do not believe.

Welcome to everyone. We hope you find peace and uplift in our service.

Amen

*Quoted by Richard Beck in his blog post, “We Could Believe We Loved Everyone,” <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/>

**<http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/why-i-go-church-even-when-i-dont-feel-it#ZQhDuVrr6H8rq3u5.99>

***http://www.npr.org/2015/09/17/441139500/lutheran-minister-preaches-a-gospel-of-love-to-junkies-drag-queens-and-outsiders?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=20150917