

“God’s Why-Not People”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

21 January 2024

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Jonah 1:1-3, 3:1-5, 10 and 4:6-11

Mark 1:14-20

“The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’”

~ Jonah 3:1-2

Prayer

God who still speaks,

Let your Word be a light to our feet

And a lamp to our path.

In Christ and through Christ we pray. Amen.

A week ago, I attended a webinar led by the faculty at the Hartford Institute for Religious Research. Scott Thumma, the Institute’s director, received a significant grant from the Lilly Endowment to explore the impact of the pandemic on congregations across the country and, during the session, I jotted down a few words Dr. Thumma said that I think are extremely relevant to our congregation on this Sunday of our Annual Meeting.

After today’s service, we will gather in Hartman Hall to reflect on what happened last year and to vote on the budget and forward-looking initiatives that will have a profound impact on our future. I hope all of you who are worshipping in-person as well as those who are with us virtually are planning to attend the Annual Meeting. I believe a Zoom link was sent out this morning to all our church members and friends. If you are going to attend the meeting remotely, please check your inbox for the link.

While dissecting the data collected by the survey on the long-term implications of the pandemic on faith communities in America, Dr. Thumma noticed a hopeful trend: congregations that lack internal conflict, have a strong sense of shared ministry, work well together, are willing to be creative, and have a positive relationship with the ministerial staff are faring better than congregations that lack the capacity to believe that things can be different and worry that their future looks uncertain. And here are the words Thumma said about these few faith communities that are defying the negative impact of COVID: rather than repeating the mantra of decline; instead of looking back to the past and say, **“we are not the church we once were,”** these congregations that are fully alive are practicing what Thumma calls **“hopeful realism.”** They are not in denial about the changes triggered by the pandemic, but they are not giving into a defeatist attitude either. These churches are open to new models and new ways of doing ministry. The congregations that are beginning to thrive again have faith that they are

going to come out of this challenging time transformed and stronger in a new way. Then Dr. Thumma got to the core of what it means to be the Church.¹ He said, “**Churches have to still have hope. Given that our religion is based on resurrection and renewal, we have to be hopeful. That’s the primary thing we have to do.**” We have to believe that things can change for the better and new life is possible because as the Angel Gabriel told young Mary, “**Nothing will be impossible with God.**”²

Indeed, one of the biggest obstacles congregations face in the renewal of our congregational life is the lack of hope, the dearth of imaginative thinking, and the absence of enthusiasm for what God’s Spirit can still do in and through the Church even though so much within and outside the Church has changed. Our pews are filled with “why-people” who have great questions but no good, workable, innovative answers to infuse the ministries and programs of the Church with new vitality. This faithful “why-crowd” is asking all the important questions. Why don’t we see more people back in the pews? Why are we not creating more programs to bring new families to the church? Why would we invest money in new initiatives if we can no longer afford a full-time associate pastor? Why are we talking about changing programs that have proved to be very successful for at least the last 30 years? Why do we have to reduce the number of deacons and trustees and simplify our organizational structure? Why do we have to change the service, the music, the hymns and so many things we love about the church? Why can’t we make ACC great again? Just kidding... I couldn’t resist.

We have to pay attention and listen to the “why-people” in our midst because they are usually the ones who are still very engaged. They care deeply about preserving what is best and most meaningful about the institution they love. The “why-askers” can see clearly the impact of the pandemic on the Church and they want to participate in the rebuilding of the faith community they call their spiritual shelter in the world. They have so many “why-questions” because they understand that inaction at this critical moment in the history of religious organizations is not an option, but they still love the traditions, the programs, the music, and the church that have nurtured their faith and kept them grounded in the teachings of Jesus Christ. The “why-people” are rightly wary of changes that might move the church away from its roots.

The late Rev. William Sloane Coffin once said this from the pulpit of Riverside Church in New York City: “**Of course the Church is conservative for it has much to conserve. But let it conserve a vision of the world’s destiny and not the structures of the world’s past. Let the Church in remembering Christ remember that it is conserving the most uprooting, the most revolutionary force in all human history... If ever there was a man who trusted his origins and had the courage to emerge from them, it was Christ.**”³

As unsettling as this may sound, “why-questions” are not enough to revitalize the Church because our call to follow Christ demands that we are prepared to embrace and practice Jesus’ ground-breaking, world-shaking, and church-reshaping message. It is our job to keep the uprooting and revolutionary power of the Gospel alive in the Church.

And to do that, we have to stay spiritually connected to the Living God who sent Jesus to invite us to drop whatever nets may be holding us back and dare to leave them behind so we can focus on our calling to be a faith community energized by the hope of the resurrection. As Desmond Tutu once reminded the American Catholic priest Richard Rohr, “***We are only the light bulbs...and our job is just to remain screwed in!***”⁴

The congregations that are beginning to experience that something good, a renewed sense of purpose, a deeper passion for mission beyond the walls of the sanctuary, and a more robust understanding of discipleship may come out of this time of revitalization post-COVID are the ones that are empowered, enlightened by God’s Spirit and willing to accept that God’s calling is always surprising and unpredictable, spilling over the edges of our traditions and programs, challenging Jesus-followers to go where they never thought they would venture out. These are the hope-filled congregations that have equipped the people in the pews, their volunteers, teams, boards, committees and leadership to go beyond the “why-questions” to begin to ask “why-not.”

To be a faithful Christian community of great imagination and deep hope that is not only willing to follow Christ but that is whole-heartedly committed to following Christ to places where we are not even sure we want to go, the church needs “why-not-people.” Followers of Christ who are fired-up by new ideas and are capable of asking “***Why not?***” to a new way of being the Church in the world. God’s “why-not people” are often the ones who believe that with God nothing is impossible! These “why-not-askers” are the ones who are asking today: “*why not expect that God will breathe new life into our church and will bless us with new growth?*” “Why-not followers of Christ” are the ones who are reminding the rest of us to have faith that God’s Spirit can and will use our lives, our gifts, our skills to be part of God’s mission to bring Good News of forgiveness and reconciliation, justice and peace, compassion and kindness, love and solidarity to the world if we remain open to God’s call, to our vocation to be a hopeful community of Jesus-followers.

Jonah is mostly known for being the only prophet who was swallowed by a large fish and, after living three days inside the creature, was spat out on the beach, miraculously still alive, but his story is defined by his outright skepticism that anything good might come out of the mission with which God entrusted him. Every other prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures showed an initial unwillingness to accept God’s call, but Jonah takes reluctance to a whole new level. He cannot imagine himself going to Nineveh, a city that was famous for its sinful ways and, on top of that, Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, one of Israel’s archenemies at the time. So rather than doing something brave like Simon, Andrew, James and John did when they met Jesus on the lakeshore and asked themselves “***Why-not follow the rabbi from Galilee?***,” Jonah asked “***Why would I go to Nineveh to offer them words of hope?***” and he heads in the exact opposite direction.

Sometimes, we all feel and act like Jonah. We hear that Voice calling us to believe that things can be different, to fulfill our mission, to make an effort to change our

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

world little by little, to take actions that can bless people and animals alike and to make a difference in the future of our church, but we cannot believe anything good can happen. We doubt that our efforts, our gifts can make a difference when the issues appear insuperable. Sometimes, we are afraid to say out loud that we do not want things to change at all. We are afraid that our routine, the world we know and the church we love may be completely changed by God. So, we try to run away as fast and as quickly as possible in the opposite direction where things are more likely to stay the same.

Honestly, I get Jonah's reluctance more than I can relate to the first disciples' willingness to leave everything behind immediately – their lives, their families, their livelihood – to follow a man they hardly knew after hearing only two words from Jesus, ***“Follow me.”*** But that's the reason the church needs God's “why-not people.” We need why-not-questioners who see possibility where others only see impossibility; who find opportunities where others encounter only obstacles; who imagine that things can be different and better while others lament that nothing is the same; who choose hopefulness at times when it is easier to give into hopelessness; who are ready to embrace a new life while others are still trying to bring the past back; who say “yes” to Christ when it would be more comfortable and reasonable to say ***“no, I cannot drop the nets.”***

As we begin this new year, I pray that we will make a commitment to inspire each other to be God's “why-not people.” The Annual Meeting is a good place for all of us to begin to practice being a congregation that truly believes that things can be different and that is not only willing to let God's Spirit move among us and bring new life into our church, but that is also ready to follow Christ, learn how to be and stay hopeful and make an effort to participate in our call to revitalize and reenergize our congregation.

By the way, we still need two deacons and two trustees and a flower coordinator to help us do the work God has entrusted us with. We can't fill these positions and get our church ready for a new life if you run in the other direction whenever you are invited to share your gifts with the whole church.

I am deeply grateful that Acton Congregational Church is a congregation that has not run away from our calling to be a faithful, Open and Affirming community of Jesus-followers. May we continue to have the strength and courage to answer God's call and say with daring hope and unwavering faith “why-not” to the new and different things the Spirit is stirring among us in this new year.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ EPIC – Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations. Clergy Health and Wellbeing Webinar, 11 January 2024.

² Luke 1:37.

³ William Sloane Coffin in *Credo*, p. 138.

⁴ Richard Rohr in *Falling Upward*, location 171 [Kindle Edition].