

WHO ARE YOU?

Last week I told you a little about me. This week I want to talk about you. Even as you are wondering about who I am, I am wondering about who you are. We both wonder: Will we be safe with each other? Will I love you? Will you love me? You have a profile on me and some hints of past reputation in former places. I have the profile your Search Committee prepared on this church and the marvelous history done by Paul and Joanne Reynolds. All of us know that records are not enough. Now we must get to know each other. But to get our bearings for the future, we must always begin with the past.

You are of Congregational persuasion more than heritage. You were knitting for the Red Cross even as and while you were talking about forming a church. You chose, with most of Congregationalism, to cast your lot with the United Church of Christ, and you held true to that choice under great duress and at considerable cost. Again and again you wondered if you should relocate, move a short distance to more spacious land, and go for a much larger church. Each time you chose to develop as well as you could where you were. Maybe it was cowardice or lethargy, but I doubt it. The People of God will attempt whatever they think God wants them to attempt. I was not here, of course; I can only conclude that you were guided to choose quality over quantity. Something felt right about staying where you were.

By the way, I do know a little bit more about you than you think. Phil Murray was pastor here from 1966 to 1975. I was pastor at the Altadena Community Church from 1967 to 1973. Phil much impressed me, and, in conversations at Conference gatherings, it seemed to me that he had a clearer and more faithful vision of the church than most of us. I remember some of his anguish over the relocation problem. When the road forks, no matter how hard we pray, we wonder if we have heard right.

In and around and under all the rest, I have been warmed by this church's clear affirmations, calls, and statements of *Christian* faith and purpose: "*The purpose of this church shall be to bind together followers of Jesus Christ*" There are certainly many other great leaders, teachers, and endless claimants to truth and guidance throughout history and in the present time, but none of the others are mentioned. "*... and in making God's will dominant in the lives of all persons, individually and collectively, especially as that*

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will is set forth in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” WOW! “This church acknowledges Jesus Christ as its head The Mission of Community Church, Congregational is to experience more fully God’s presence and to integrate the teachings of Jesus Christ in our daily lives”

There is more, of course – lots more. But in a world where the liberal church increasingly waffles and quibbles about such things, I love that you say it out clear and straight. A people after my own heart. In fact, it is a little disturbing. And I found myself looking for the “Congregational part” – the insistence on individual freedom under the Spirit. Whew! It’s there: *“Each member shall have the undisturbed right to follow the Word of God according to the dictates of his/her conscience, under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.”* Some of you at times probably think that it should be written “the *disturbing* right.” But there it is. As dangerous as it is, and as much as Congregationalism has been mocked for it down through the years, we trust the guidance of the Holy Spirit more than ecclesiastical hierarchy, organizational pressure, or clerical privilege. If we all keep praying, we have the best polity in the world. If we do not, we have the worst.

So you have your own fascinating past as a congregation, and from the beginning you linked up with not the biggest but the best denominational heritage. No laughter? Well, it does depend on what a person is looking for. In any case, it is what it is, and here we are.

Now, we can explain all of this, as often we do and should, from a simply human perspective: Mrs. Cox and Mrs. Lewis got to talking, and then there were meetings, and we decided this, and then we did that, and one thing led to another, and we taught Sunday School, and we built the church, and many lives were influenced, etc. You can believe that is the full story of what happened if you want to. But I doubt if you want to any more than I do. It is too clear that the Spirit was talking to Mrs. Cox and Mrs. Lewis even before *they* started talking to each other. Then this sick, old, retired minister was healed and brought sideways onto the scene, and for seven years he led with great energy, perseverance, vision, and focus. I mean, if we were in the Book of Acts, we would be talking miracles.

There is this marvelous passage we just read from John’s Gospel. Someday we will get into more of it, but I wanted specifically to remind you of verse sixteen: *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit*

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should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.” You did not choose me, I chose you ...

Do you think Jesus can still say that to His followers? If not, we are going to end up wasting each other’s time. We could each tell our stories of how we got here. And we could, and sometimes should, make them sound mundane and “natural.” We knew so-and-so; had this conversation; thought such-and-such; were drawn by this or that – and finally decided to join here. All on our own with no outside influence? No, the Spirit was always behind it. I call you to remember: you were chosen before you chose.

There are many wonderful churches all over the place. But you are here. You come from Huntington Beach, Costa Mesa, Irvine, and lots of places besides Corona del Mar. You drive past other churches that Jesus loves and works in. You are not only chosen, but you are *called* to be here – be part of *this* faith family. Golly, maybe Jesus really *is* the head of this church. Maybe we really *are* each sent here for a reason and a purpose. I hope you will go on believing it and acting like it. We never choose Jesus first. We are not that farsighted or that fast. He always chooses us first, and we get to respond to that. So we should thank Him for the past – honor it and learn from it. And let us also be alert and eager for what Jesus now wants to do with us and through us.

That may well be the end of the sermon, but I have some personal remarks. I want to thank you for being here. I want to thank you for the fact that this church is still here – still working and witnessing. I may not thank you as well as others could, but I will do it the best I can.

You are the ones who would not run or leave despite the trouble. Some of you maybe have personalities that are just too stubborn, but it is more than that. You love this church or you love Jesus – or both – too much to desert. It has always been so. The Christian church has survived these past two thousand years because of folk like you. I salute you. Jesus appreciates you. Thank you.

The church does not survive because of the temporary glitter, because it learns to make itself look cute or hip or cool, because it finds the popular buzzwords or images and runs with them, or because it learns to advertise really well. “The church which is married to the spirit of the age will be a widow in the next.” (William R. Inge) We are

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followers of Jesus the Christ. We do not belong to this present age – we belong to Jesus Christ. We will survive as long as Jesus keeps sending us those who are followers or who want to become followers. And as long as we are faithful, Jesus will keep sending such people here. Of course, from time to time others may come here from other sources or for different reasons. They may or may not interfere with what is supposed to happen here. It is not our job to figure out such things. Nevertheless, every church survives because some people come to love Jesus and His church too much to run away or leave when trouble comes. And sooner or later, trouble always comes.

Some people think Satan is an old-fashioned concept or a myth that ignorant people – like Jesus or Paul or Augustine or Luther – believed in. With the exception of Jesus, I just named some of the most brilliant and best-educated people who ever lived. And Jesus is no exception; He just did not do it the traditional way. But I stray. Satan is well and strong in our world, regardless of who believes or disbelieves in him. When I lived in New England years ago, if we saw deer tracks in a hunter's snow, we concluded there must be deer in the region. In our time, some people are too sophisticated to follow such simple logic regarding Satan – or regarding Jesus, for that matter.

Something satanic – using strings of circumstance that often were not easy to track – has tried to destroy this church, or at least drop it to a place where it could no longer be effective. It has happened before. It will doubtless happen again. *I hope you have not missed the compliment.* And every last one of you has been tested, one way or another, in the process. It shook your faith, at least outwardly. Some of you even tried to run or leave but found the bonds were stronger than you thought. Nobody gets to decide how the test will strike them. But you are still here. It does not matter what we go through; it matters where we end up. Hopefully you identify more easily now with Peter and the rest of the twelve – and all the rest of us who have ever tried to walk this Path. If a person has not heard the rooster's cry, they have not been on the Path for very long.

Those of us who come to any level of genuine faith and love for Jesus know also that it is worth any price. And that it is seldom sung or seen as grand in the culture around us. We put in our time here; do our little deeds of survival; try, as we have opportunity or understanding, to spread the news and the influence of an incredible new Kingdom that exists all around us yet is unseen by most. And we

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come to the place where nothing on earth – not trouble, not even death itself – can chase us off the WAY. We do not live for fame or wealth or glory. Not that we would mind if any of it tracked us down, but it does not *matter*. We live to be faithful. And we have learned on deeper levels that we must be faithful to live.

So thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for being here. Thank you for what Paul called “patient endurance.” It has always been the second greatest virtue of the Christian Life. But some of you are marring it by comparing yourself to other churches – wondering why other churches around you are bigger, more successful, growing so fast. Pardon me, but it is none of your business! You can have friendly interest, but it is none of your business what Jesus wants to do with His other churches. We cannot find out what Jesus wants of us by aping other churches. The wisdom of our world says we should see how the successful are doing it and then pattern ourselves after them. Is that what you do on the individual level? Yes, some people do. They read self-help books instead of praying more. They try to be somebody else instead of discovering and going with what God made them to be and calls them to become.

Rabbi Joseph Akiba, of small renown outside his own village and greatly loved within it, would say to his students: I used to worry and fret that I was not more famous, more influential, or doing more for our faith. Until one day an angel came to me in a vision and said, “Joseph, when you get to the other side, God is not going to say to you, ‘Why were you not Moses? O why were you not Moses?’ God is going to say to you, ‘Why were you not Joseph Akiba?’” [That is what I made you. That is what I wanted from you.]

How do you know what Jesus wants this church to be like? Do you really believe in the foolish side of ecumenicity that thinks Jesus wants all His churches to be the same? Does God ever create individuals with the same gifts? Do all churches live in the same community, have the same mission, display the same strengths? Do you not realize that God has a specific identity and task and purpose for each individual congregation? It is our job to discover our own and to fulfill it. Everything else merely sidetracks us, delaying our purpose and our joy.

When Satan struck, you found out that some stuff around here was not built on rock. (And the rock is Christ, as the New Testament keeps reminding us.) You also found that a lot *was* built on rock.

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I hope that is comforting. And now, do you trust anything of your faith journey as a church so far? Look around you. Are we supposed to be a church of three thousand members? Where would you put them? Where would they park? If that is what you think, then either Jesus must be pretty stupid or none of our members were praying very much in the past.

It must be that we are supposed to be an outpost of quality rather than quantity. That's exciting! The larger the group, the more generic its faith and mission have to be. So we are supposed to be specialists of some kind. What kind? There must be specific kinds of people Jesus expects us to be able to reach that more generic churches would never be able to reach. Who are they? What are they like? Won't it be fun to meet them?

Let me ask one more question. It is one I think about all the time. If Jesus sent a person here to learn about the Christian Path and to come to personally know the Spirit's presence, how, by coming here, would that person learn such things?

Many people have told me that they went to church for years and were never taught anything in depth about prayer, about the Bible, about developing the spiritual life, about temptation, about humility, or even about Jesus. They came; they liked the people; they were put on a committee; they were asked to give money. But, they said, nobody taught them the spiritual disciplines; nobody told them there were things they could do to develop; nobody showed them the way "in" to the Christian Life.

Some of these people persevered, dug in, and figured it out for themselves. Lots more of them left, never getting but the vaguest impressions of what the Christian Life was supposed to be about. Show up; support the organization; give to worthy causes. That doesn't make it! As many a person has complained: "That tells me nothing about Christianity. I don't need to go to church to learn any of that. I can learn that from Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, the Rotary Club, the March of Dimes. Anybody who cares about or believes in anything knows that." What does it mean to be Christian? How long would it take a person coming to this church to find out what it means to be a Christian and how to walk the Christian WAY of Life?

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As you know, Jesus' early followers were called "Christians" as a term of derision, much as our own forebears were called "Yankees." In both cases, we accepted the term and kept it. Before that, Christians were called "Followers of the WAY." That in turn was short for "Followers of the Way of Jesus." Sometimes I wish we could return to it. In truth, though we acquire bits and pieces of many things as we go, essentially Christianity is *not* an organization, a creed, a set of beliefs, a program, a club. Christianity is a Way, a Path, a Journey, a Pilgrimage. I hope together we will make sure that anyone who comes here – and is willing – will find help along THE WAY.