

Lamentations 3:22-30
2 Corinthians 5:20b – 6:10

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
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Suffering and the Path of the Church

As servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honour and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. *2 Corinthians 6:4-8a*

In the past couple of weeks I visited two Presbyterian churches with extraordinary similarities, yet over 2,000 miles apart. The first was Broad Street Ministry downtown, with whom we are exploring some partnerships in ministry. As I wrote recently in our newsletter, "Broad Street" has no "members." It stands like an icon of another age opposite that shimmering modern temple of the arts, The Kimmel Center. Many come to Broad Street (the old Chambers-Wylie Presbyterian) for worship or shelter, for a meal or a safe haven free from injury or theft in traditional homeless shelters. Many have lived on the street for years; one woman for *forty* years! Some have mental disorders. Mixed in are blue-suited professional people and folks from the arts community. At each worship service they celebrate the Lord's Supper. And as the invitation is given, said Erika Funk, the associate pastor, and the pastors turn toward the table to pick up bread and cup, before they can turn back around a solid line stands inches away like hungry children with pleading faces, so eager to be fed with the bread of God's presence.

Second was Southside Presbyterian in Tucson, Arizona. Tucson is an anomaly: a thriving metropolitan area of one million souls deep in the Sonoran Desert, a desert almost the size of Germany! It has no sustained rivers or surface water, virtually no cropland, trees, oil or natural resources. Southside's sanctuary is a wooden roundhouse with a cactus stick ceiling, and a thick rough hewn communion table dominating its center. In the circle of bench pews sit migrant workers, middle class folk (the term begins to grate in such a sacred setting), people in business suits, the homeless jobless, Native American, White, African American, Hispanic, and we visitors in our East Coast blazers and summer frocks. For twenty minutes the pastor stalked the pews with a mike, drawing out prayer requests of every conceivable need: a critically ill child, a best friend who's slipped into alcoholism again; people looking for day's work, let alone a job; a young man who, through an interpreter, thanked the people of the church for rescuing him from the desert. He looked like he'd barely escaped with his life. Together we prayed and sang and swayed and clapped our hands to an old bar-room piano, and raised the cup and broke bread together. And Jesus' smiling presence was on every face.

Through every life, whether at Broad Street or Southside, a common thread interlaced each life, rich or poor, free soul or captive spirit to some white powder or crystal crack, internet obsession or gambling compulsion, or bottled firewater. It was the magnetic, hope ladling presence of God that drew them there. The common thread in this wilderness tested life (God

has no need to add to our natural burdens) the great leveler, whether frequently or occasionally—is *suffering* and the belief that God in Christ can see them through. As a testimony the words most often uttered with lifted hands or muted voices, was “Thank you, Jesus.”

Suffering is native to the life of the church. Jesus’ monumental suffering produces our salvation. His death at our hands, and his resurrection bequeath new life to us. Paul’s litany of “afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger” speaks for itself. Such afflictions may induce a threadbare faith in lesser mortals, but for him, as for Christ, they were the natural currency of standing over against the world. The early church was a martyr church, not because Christians believed martyrdom to be a ticket to salvation, (unlike tragically brainwashed young Sunni Muslims), just the consequence of faithfulness to the power beyond all powers. Suffering has characterized the faithful in every age where the few in the church have sought to bring the many into compliance with kingdom of God principles. Sufferings, not sustained but endurable ... sufferings (by the grace of God) are the stepping stones to each new stage of Christian maturity, as James Fowler has demonstrated. In his groundbreaking work, *Stages of Faith*, Fowler, my doctoral advisor at Emory, showed conclusively from hundreds of interviews how times of crisis become potential doorways to a more mature stage of faith. Some personal crisis often causes a person to retreat into the relative safety of the known, the familiar territory of what one believed to that point. Perhaps we justify or reason away the hardship saying, “The devil made me do it,” or “God must have a reason.” Or faith is jettisoned as unworkable. But others rebuild from the shards that endure as new insights emerge from the experience.

What applies to individuals applies also to institutions, especially our beleaguered churches. Traditional churches in North America are in such a time of crisis. Many new churches in recent decades have sought a new way through these transitional times, some mostly to the right, with much success. New waves of being church go by such names as “Seeker,” “Emerging” or “Emergent,” “Missional,” or “Purpose Driven,” or “Next,” or “Multi-site,” or “Mall,” or “cell-based,” or “House,” or “Ancient-Future,” or “Vineyard,” and so on.

What characterizes each is a willingness to take risks in order to find a *faithful path that works for that community*. To be willing to cut through time honored, largely *adopted* ways of being church—if they hinder growth and mature change. To become prayerfully responsive to new patterns of faithfulness, as the Spirit leads us. It means taking risks together. Sometimes failing together, but being willing to hold each other up in our failures and try again. One thing is certain: if we do not each seek to grow in our own faith, sacrificially, faithful to God and each other, a time will come when we will find it easy simply to drift away. But if we mature in spirit, our former state will seem as a waterless desert, and our new one, an oasis.

Which leads me to a beautiful place. We are, over a hundred of us, making such a move in our ten week ALPHA program. In the fall of 2009 we are considering offering it again, perhaps opening it up to the community.

This brings me back to the Broad Street church downtown.

Inside its massive sanctuary one expects the eye to linger on the great vault under the high ceiling. But instead of airy nothing under that towering dark oak canopy there hovers a baffling incongruity: six steel framed windmills such as might dot a Midwestern prairie, each eight feet tall, and between them darts of colored paper like origami figures.

Erika explained how the seldom used sanctuary (worship is held in the fellowship hall below) seemed to beg for the companionship of art. So two artists were commissioned. One devised the windmills, I sense to induce that space to revive with pulsing vibrato of worship; each windmill's still blades beg for the wind of the Spirit to blow a new thing.

The second artist took sheets of colored paper, and during successive evening services in the less cavernous hall below, invited worshipers to write their prayers on them. Scarred by former church experience, she told how, later, she took each prayer, read it, then folded it into a bird, holding each in her hand as an invitation for God's favor. Each prayer gave voice to a multitude of hurts and deep yearnings: "I haven't seen my son in twenty years." "God, if I have to keep living on the street I know I'll be dead in a year." "I'm so scared, God." Then she linked their rainbow colored birds in strands and fixed them among the windmills, giving the unmistakable sense of birds caught in a windstorm of the exuberant Spirit.

The very suffering at the heart of that church has become the catalyst for God's Spirit to sweep through that growing congregation. So much so that they are now contemplating moving worship up one floor to dance and sing and break bread together beneath those windmills and the prayer birds.

Right here in Mainline St. John's, I feel the same Spirit stirring.

Thanks be to God. Amen.