

This past week I had two conversations that were challenging for me – and I mean challenging in the best possible way.

The first was at Theology on Tap. We had “theological grab-bag” as our topic for the night so the guys wrote down their questions on slips of paper and I did my best to answer them. In case you are wondering, yes, it is exactly as risky as it sounds. But the questions were great questions and I enjoyed the challenge.

One of the questions was about how seminaries train ministers both to plant and to develop churches. My answer was the seminaries, by and large, in my experience don’t do such a hot job of training ministers in this way – they train us theologically and then expect us to learn that other stuff on the job. This is probably not true of all seminaries and it might not be true even of the school where I was trained anymore, but it was my experience. But we talked about what gives a church life – whether it is an emergent church or an established church such as Morningside is.

And then again on Thursday I was in a conversation with a clergy group of which I’m a part, and Bill Boling from the Atlanta Food Bank had just spent the morning talking to us about what drives the Food Bank and how they operate – and he put in all of our minds a wonderful quote from Howard Thurman, “Don’t ask what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive and then go do that.”

Being that it was a clergy group we were naturally talking about the congregations we serve. One of my colleagues asked a question and I don’t mind sharing this with you because it is a question that could be asked by pretty much any clergyperson anywhere.

My colleague said, “We have loads of wonderful people who are doing wonderful things

and they are being deeply faithful to Jesus. But we seem to be doing them in ones and twos. Do any churches have that overarching value that ties them all together?

I practically leapt out of my chair to answer him.

“Yes,” I said, “Morningside has one value that shapes much of how we do everything.

And I talk about it a lot. We are deeply committed to inclusivity. We want everyone to know that there is a place for them at Morningside. If you’re conservative, great, you’re welcome here. Same if you’re liberal, or anywhere in between. We want to be economically inclusive, so if the church is doing something together and money’s a problem for someone, we’ll overcome it. We were early leaders – well before my time here - in being fully inclusive regarding sexual orientation and every family is welcome at Morningside.” And then I added, “And the truth is, it has cost us a few members along the way and I’m sure there are people who don’t join Morningside because that level of inclusivity isn’t their value. But it’s who we are, and even when we fail to achieve it, it is at least who we want to be.”

I believe that is what makes us come alive.

Doing what God calls us to do makes us come alive.

And I want you to know that I am monumentally aware that those of us who are here every Sunday can probably recite the beginning of the concerns of the church verbatim. I really do try to mix it up a bit or at least change my inflection, but I’m pretty sure you’ve all got it down. “Good morning and welcome to Morningside Presbyterian Church... if you’re a visitor or guest... we mean our word of welcome with no qualifying adjectives...”

By the way, if you actually are a visitor or guest, I really did mean that part sincerely and the church really does mean it – it's who we are. It's just that there is a limit to how many different ways you can say that welcome either means welcome or it doesn't, period.

And for what it's worth, that's the part of my week that makes me sinfully proud of being Morningside's pastor – even if I can't come up with an original way of saying it every week, it's what drew me here in the first place and it's one of my absolute favorite things about this particular body of faith – that when we say welcome, we don't have to backtrack.

And it is also what makes us come alive.

It is what makes us come alive because it is what God has called us to do and be.

And God has called us to do this and to be this as a congregation, and God has called us to do this and be this as individuals – and the time of that calling is your baptism. It is the sacrament of inclusion that calls us all to inclusivity.

If this feels a little bit like love-bombing from your pastor, it sort of is. But then I got to thinking about it – I'm telling you that I think it is an admirable and rare trait for a congregation to seek to be truly and deeply inclusive – to welcome with the kind of welcome that is as big as God is – but then I had to think about what the obstacles are to being a truly and deeply welcoming congregation.

And as I thought about it what I came to was fear.

There is, to be sure, a certain amount of fear of the other that has driven churches to fall short of the mark of genuine welcome. And certainly the church, an institution comprised of redeemed sinners has missed the mark on occasion. Every church misses

the mark on occasion. This church has missed the mark. You get a bunch of people together and certain limitations quickly become evident. And fear of the other is one of those fears that is as old as time. Why do you suppose the Bible is so full of concern for the alien resident living in your towns, to borrow a line from the Ten Commandments? It is because the fear of the outsider or the other is as old as the idea of faith itself.

And I do not mean to suggest that those of us who articulate a vision of welcome as wide as God's grace are somehow fearless and pristine whereas those congregations and persons who erect barriers – intentionally or otherwise - are craven and faithless. Indeed, it is the fear of being unfaithful to God's designs and wishes that has motivated much exclusivity.

But on the topic of fear, the Bible has a great deal to say. "Perfect love casts out fear," writes John in his first epistle. "Be not afraid, only believe," says Jesus in Mark.

And of course, from the Word of the Lord from Isaiah, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

God's claim on us is what enables us to do and be what God calls us to do and be.

This word of grace comes from God for the Israelites at precisely their lowest moment.

When God calls them to be raised up and to know who they are and who it is who has called them to be it, that calling comes right after one of the harshest judgments the Israelites encounter – it comes right on the heels of the depths of the Babylonian captivity.

And while the problem the Israelites faced early on was idolatry, by the time we get around to the major and minor prophets – who, incidentally are identified as major or minor based on nothing more significant than length – the chief complaint that God has

with the people is first, that they have dabbled in foreign alliances rather than trusting in the living God, and second – and more importantly in the minor prophets – that they have run roughshod over the poor, the orphans, the widows, the aliens and generally the marginalized – anyone they could get the upper hand on.

Getting the upper hand on someone and using it is a remarkably exclusive practice. It does nothing to bring grace – to *include* the person who is weaker in the equation.

And the result of this exclusivity of privilege is that the people are ruined. They are defeated in battle, again and again, finally so conclusively that they are dragged off to hard labor in a foreign land, and then God says more or less, “This is what happens when...”

But the grace of God is never more real than when there is something *real* to forgive and so it is that the God of redemption says to the people, “do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.”

When we make our word of welcome here at Morningside, we do so because we have heard the Word of God, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.”

And when we hear this and act upon it and live in it, it opens the door for us to be the human beings that God has created us to be.

We are called as a church, but you are called as a person to this knowledge.

YOU are called – you specifically and you particularly. I can’t list everyone by name, but God has called each of you by name – and to us all has said,

“Do not fear – I have redeemed you – you are mine.”

Writing on Baptism, David Willis and the late William Placher wrote this in their wonderful book, Belonging to God. They wrote, “*In life and in death, we belong to God*, [that’s straight from the catechism] Instead of being alienated from God, and instead of being strangers and aliens to the promises, we are adopted, brought into, made part of the household of God, freed to participate in life together in Christ.”¹

That is what it means to be in Christ – it is to be called into this thing together.

That is what is going on at the baptism of the Lord, which we mark today: God is declaring, to all of us – do not be afraid, I am in this thing with you.

We’re all in this thing together and God is in this thing with us.

That’s what it means to be baptized – we’re all in this thing – this life – together, and God is in this thing with us.

There is an old story about Martin Luther – told so often I expect it’s true, that in the depths of the reformation – and surely there were depths – as he was excommunicated from what he was raised to believe was the true church and under threat of death should the reformation be reversed that he would at the start of each day say to himself, “Remember, Martin, that you are baptized.”

Remember that you are baptized. You belong to God.

Back in the early nineties, Central Presbyterian downtown was remodeling their sanctuary. If you have ever lived through any form of a church renovation you know that nothing is ever as easy as it seems. There is discussion about just about everything – what color should the carpet be, will we recover the furniture or replace it – can we afford to renovate the antiphonal organ – things just come up in renovations that you have to

¹ William C. Placher and David Willis-Watkins. Belonging to God: a Commentary on a Brief Statement of Faith. (W/JKP, Louisville, 1992) p153

address. And what came up for Central was the placement of their baptismal font. It turned out that most of the members of the renovation committee wanted to keep it where it was in the sanctuary before the renovation – but the traffic flow of the renovated building changed so that the majority of the congregation would now enter the sanctuary where they would have to walk around the font. The architect advising the congregation quickly pointed out to them that this was a problem – surely they didn’t want the font right in the middle of everything? Surely it should be moved out of the way.

“No,” the committee said. They wanted it right in the middle of everything – they wanted all the traffic to go past it. They wanted the people to touch it and brush past it. They wanted elderly people to lean on it and children to run around it. In short, they wanted it right in the middle of it all, right in the middle of their common life.

Remember you are baptized, says Luther.

Be free of fear – live together in the common life to which Jesus has called us in his baptism – to know that we are all in this thing together and God is in this thing with us.

“Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.