

“From the Ground”

Sermon on Palm Sunday, April 10, 2022

Dear Church,

A few of us met with Bishop Davenport via zoom last week. We wanted to explore with her the issue of inequalities in our synod. In Southeastern PA we have a number of African American and Hispanic clergy members, and only one of them, says Bishop Davenport, gets paid according to synod guidelines. The others are often without a pension, without full health care benefits and forced to work past retirement age to make ends meet. Most of these wonderful servants of Christ are very passionate about ministry; they usually serve people in low-income communities. It's not that someone decided they should earn less, but it's a matter of where they serve and what their communities can afford.

In the course of the conversation, Bishop Davenport reminded us that most effective solutions in the church come from below, from the people, from the grassroots. And while she did not fully convince me on this particular issue where I think guidance and direction also needs to come from our synod leadership, I agree that most good church work grows like everything else in this spring season: from below. In our culture we have paid a price for believing that we can just force things on people, and it usually doesn't work so well. The top down approach doesn't work in all that well in government; it doesn't work all that well in church; it frequently fails to inspire. The best innovations come, like every flower in this spring season: from below.

Here in our little church we have experienced how ideas can germinate on the ground level, among people, and grow some beautiful flowers. When the right individuals come together at the right time and the Holy Spirit sparks divine electricity into their fellowship, good things happen! A number of ministries have been born that way. Here is just one example... For years we were thinking about a contemporary band. We had written it into our vision document in 2009 and certain people, including the pastor, thought it was a good idea. And so we gave it a shot, the music was often excellent, but the effort also

seemed forced at times, including from the pastor of the church, some German guy. I remember our fearless leader Liz saying at various times, “I don’t have the people to do this. Who else can I ask?”

It turns out, we really had to wait until Pastor Mike Carlson decided to retire and find this church. He brought the extra energy that is needed and the desire to see this through, and all of a sudden, magically, a number of other people showed up with the same kind of interest and a band was formed, “A Common Thread.” The idea quickly turned into reality, not because of some vision document written 12 years earlier but because it had sprung from God’s holy ground. That’s why I don’t like to shoot ideas down or muzzle people who have a passion for a particular part of ministry. The best things in the kingdom of God come from the ground. Even the gospel itself came from the ground!

Paul included a most beautiful hymn in his letter to the Philippians. It praises Christ’s path from heaven to earth, to the cross and to heaven, in humility and in a spirit of servanthood. This hymn, which has had a special place in the church since the earliest times, reminds us of God’s willingness to start from the ground, to become “fully human,” as the church fathers said. In other words: God chose the opposite direction of most human endeavors. Our culture and economy are designed for people to work their way up toward higher positions. Those who are deemed successful become influential CEO’s, superintendents, presidents, bishops. The Christian gospel preaches a different movement: the leader as a servant, the most important person as the one making the greatest sacrifice; privilege given up in order to join the people. And while we still think, “That’s nice of Christ to be so charitable, so humble and selfless,” Paul’s says, “Let’s not leave it there. Let’s imitate Christ! Let us have the same mindset!”

What did the church do in response to the example of Christ? We quickly built a hierarchical church, with bishops and popes, designed after the models of the world. Alleluia! While I don’t wish to criticize our brothers and sister in the biggest Christian denomination, it still has to be said that the Roman Church embodies the exact top-down approach that Jesus declined. And we haven’t been better in the Lutheran Church

for the most part. Why is that? Maybe because the way of Christ is more challenging? Maybe because it's easier to follow marching orders from above? Or because men have been in charge for too long? Listening to the ground, paying attention to the work of the spirit here below is hard work, messy work, but it's the way of Christ. That's why he refused to be called King or Messiah or Boss. That's why he empowered his disciples to continue in his path. That's why people must always matter in a church that calls itself Christ-ian. Because God does his or her best work from the ground up. Like the flowers in the spring. **Amen.**