

With a Spirit of Holy Boldness

John 14:2, 2 Timothy 1:3-7

October 18, 2020

La Verne Church of the Brethren

Susan Boyer

When this pandemic became our reality and we were told to stay home and away from others for our protection and theirs, it was mind-bending. Suddenly we were bombarded with so many questions about how to live. How do I get groceries? What will school look like for my children? Have you found any toilet paper? What do I need technologically in order to work from home? Is it safe for me to visit my friends or grandparents? How can we be church during this time? And on and on.

We had different responses. Some people saw this as a time of respite from the crazy way we usually live our lives and took time to be still. Some worked hard to figure out how to keep things going with enough familiarity to calm our nerves. Some said this is a hoax and we should refuse to be sucked in. Some people, with a spirit of holy boldness, rose to the challenges with great creativity and energy to experiment with newness.

I want to remind us what has happened here at the La Verne Church of the Brethren in the last seven months -- where we started and what it looks like now. This congregation went to online worship services on March 15. Over a quick span of time, staff and volunteers learned how to film themselves from their own smart phones and upload their videos so they could be edited together into one service -- many people functioning apart and yet coming together to allow us the space to worship as a community. Our statistics show that worship attendance increased an average of 81 people per Sunday over the summer months. Geography is not a barrier to participation in a virtual world. With a spirit of holy boldness, this church learned we could worship together while physically apart.

The kitchen is the heart of this church. The table is central to our theology of care and service. In the past we have gathered around the table for fellowship meals, Love Feast and after memorial services. We used our kitchen to provide meals for those in need. Before the pandemic we took one meal a month to the local homeless shelter – feeding almost 200 people. Suddenly it became hugely difficult to get the food staples needed to provide that meal. Having volunteers together in the kitchen seemed risky. Other organizations providing food to the homeless shelter had to back out of their commitment, leaving the staff in the shelter very concerned. Corlan, our kitchen coordinator, is not someone who gives up easily, especially when there is a dire need. She has created a well-oiled machine that provides anywhere from 5-9 meals a month to Hope for Home. We have been able to increase our ministry because of Corlan's refusal to give up; a grant from our denomination; excess food the Bonita Unified School district shared with us; and your generous financial contributions. We also used to collaborate with the University of La Verne to provide a meal once a month to college students and young adults. Just this month, we have begun to collaborate with ULV

again to provide weekend box lunches to food insecure college students. The Peace and Carrots Community Garden folks have donated a record-breaking 3,150 pounds of fresh produce to the local food bank so far this year. In a few weeks food insecure college students will come to the garden to harvest fresh produce so they can eat. With a spirit of holy boldness, we have extended our table.

Caring Circles were created in March so that people in the congregation would have someone to which they can connect on a more personal level. Pastor Dawna offers a weekly Share and Prayer Room. We have combined Spiritual Formation and CONNECT! Groups into a Virtual CONNECT! Ministry. Usually our CONNECT! Groups go dark in the summer as people travel. But this year these groups continued strong, providing us places to gather around everything from racial justice to a podcast study, from yoga to Bible study. With a spirit of holy boldness, we have continued the joy of being “church” to each other while stretching our bodies, our hearts, our minds and our courage muscles.

A couple weeks before we began sheltering in place, we had a day-long training on Kingian Nonviolence. At the end of the day we divided ourselves up into three working groups focused on racial justice. Then the pandemic hit, and we sat back waiting until it was over to start moving forward. But racial injustice became so uncovered by this pandemic that all three groups stepped up to work together...while apart. We don't have to be in the same room to have the same heart and commitment for justice work. We have opened up our own awareness while working in solidarity with our community, denomination and world. With a spirit of holy boldness, we have committed ourselves to be fully present to this moment.

Peace Camp has been one of the best things we do here. In the past children and adults joined together each summer for five days of activity centered around peaceful living. This year Peace Camp went virtual. Amanda, our Coordinator for Children and Family Ministries, worked with volunteers and a Summer Service worker from the University of La Verne to create a virtual experience for children. The children, youth and families have continued to meet via Zoom throughout this pandemic to create community and do everything from read stories to work out together. With a spirit of holy boldness, we have continued to be present to the needs of our children, youth and families.

We have brought in new members, had an anointing service, memorialized those we have lost, celebrated communion and Love Feast and fellowshiped together – all virtually. Commissions and the board continue to work on our behalf. A generous donation allowed us to take this opportunity to fix the baptistry, which was leaking into the choir loft. An ensemble of musicians, who refer to themselves as the Covid Choir, follow strict safety protocols and bring music to enhance our online worship and memorial services. With a spirit of holy boldness, ministry has continued here in new and innovative ways.

Even in a pandemic with a prolonged time of separation we can see how the Spirit has given us reasons to celebrate. I wouldn't have guessed that to be true. But I don't want to sound

pollyannish. There are things that are heartbreaking in this time. We have older adults and people who struggle financially who are not equipped with the technology to be able to hop onto a Zoom CONNECT! group or join us for online worship. We have lost members of our church family and while we can have a memorial service online, we can't hug the family members who are grieving. Our children don't fully understand why they can't see their church friends in person. We can't gather around tables in the Fellowship Hall or join our voices in song or visit our members in the hospital. People have lost jobs; become sick with Covid-19; set their dreams on hold. There are things we have lost this time that we cannot celebrate, things we can only grieve.

In the scripture that Dale read to us this morning, the Apostle Paul provides mentoring words of support and encouragement to Timothy who was going through a rough time. He was discouraged and trying to figure out the path for the future. Paul wishes that he and Timothy could be together in person, but in the meantime, Paul reminds Timothy that he was blessed with a sincere faith that was passed down to him from the generations that went before him. Timothy is the recipient of a legacy of faith and faithfulness. Paul says, "You already have what you need. The Spirit of God is present and what she gives you is not a spirit of cowardice but a spirit of love and power and self-discipline." In other words, a spirit of holy boldness.

We are in need of these words from the Apostle Paul right now. As we look to the future, we are weary. I know I am. We don't know when we will feel safe again to sing in the church choir, hug our friends after worship, join together on the courtyard on Christmas Eve to hold our candles aloft as we declare the light of Christ that the darkness cannot overcome. We are in the stretch of this journey in which discouragement and disappointment could overtake us. In my conversations with people I can tell that many of us are done with these times. We threw our energy and creativity into the mix, but we are growing tired. If you add political division, racial injustice, civil unrest and climate change into the pot, it is overwhelming.

The Bennett family read to us today the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples just hours before he was arrested and tried and crucified. He said, "This may be hard to believe but if you follow me you will also do the amazing things I have done...in fact, you will do even greater things than you have seen me do. Because the Spirit is on the horizon."

Friends, we have been blessed with a deep legacy of faith and faithfulness. It has been passed down to us from generation to generation by our spiritual ancestors who walked through their own challenging and difficult times. Those who come after us are counting on us to be people of grit and grace. And as Paul reminds us, everything we need is already here. It is going to look different. The familiar is gone but at the core, love and justice and service and connection and worship are still present and strong. The Spirit is calling us to be people of courage, not cowardice. The Spirit is emboldening us with love; filling us with power and calling us to simplify our living.

As we think about what our church is going to be in 2021 and the years that follow, may we journey forward, as we have done these last seven months, with creativity, strength and clarity. May our grit, tenacity and graciousness drive us forward even in the times when we feel weary and uncertain....especially then. May we hold tight to the ministry of this church that calls us to fully love God and our neighbor. For what we need is here. May we combine our talents, our money, our skills and our love. For we are more whole together when we can remind each other that God has gifted us a spirit of holy boldness and the world is about to turn. Amen.