

Living Artistically

Psalm 40:30a, Matthew 13:10-17

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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As we begin to move slowly out of our cocoons and back into the world, I am compelled by the question, "How have we been fundamentally changed by Covid-19 after more than 12 months of living physically disconnected from society?" I have been asking this question for months now and people kept telling me it was too soon to know the answer, and rightly so. But now people from all areas of our lives are conjecturing on the answer to this question.

Pastors, scientists, sociologists, artists, educators, mental health professionals, attorneys, law enforcement, politicians, health care providers, corporate America...heck everyone...is putting their opinion out there. What did the last year expose about who we are as a society? How have we adapted for our new reality? How has this shifted who we will be going forward? Whoever we are, wherever we live, whatever our circumstance we now see things we didn't see before.

Racial and socioeconomic inequality were laid bare for all to see, not just for those who live in that reality daily. We witnessed how many of our older adults are alone and lonely. We saw how essential certain workers are who, truth be told, we never really considered before. Many of the systems of our society showed their lack of elasticity. This past year demanded that we be agile, adaptable and creative. Some people and some systems completely failed to meet the challenge. For example, our criminal justice system continued to keep people locked up even though it very likely meant they would get seriously ill or die. We refused to look at creative alternatives. Federal bureaucracy was unable to pivot easily to meet the varied and urgent demands of a global pandemic.

However, we have met some the challenges with flexibility and creativity. For those of us who had forgotten how to cook at home, we have stretched our culinary muscles. In the most challenging months of the pandemic, I ordered food by InstaCart and it was like a surprise every time. For a while, I stacked up all the things that were delivered that I didn't order but I finally got creative and figured out how to use them.

Many of us took a master class in observation this past year. How many of you really began to study nature during the pandemic? When your world gets smaller, nature seems to get larger. All those weird bugs and intricate flowers were there before but we were in too much of a hurry to notice them.

We all became much more aware of others, also. I learned how to be more expressive with my eyes and my body language while wearing a mask, as I met strangers on my daily walk or navigated my cart past others in the grocery store.

Houses of worship were stripped of the buildings we rely on and that also, frankly, constrain us. What remained required new eyes regarding ancient practices. How do we worship without the ability to gather in one location? We learned new ways to join together to worship, nurture each other and serve others. While there were losses in our worshiping life, like combining our voices and hugging each other, there was also newness. We, who speak of the importance of inclusion, widened the geographic circle of those who worship with us on a regular basis. We were able to put our message of love, inclusion, justice and peace out into the world beyond our little corner. We thought more creatively about worship than we can when there are pews and time restraints. Caregiving, essential to our spiritual practice and in most church's relegated to clergy, expanded as many of you picked up that role to make sure no one got left behind. We quadrupled our service to those who live with homelessness. We greatly advanced our use of social media to respond to what is happening right now in our world. We became more relevant over the last 14 months.

We have embraced technology in almost all aspects of living. There is no turning back. I never thought I would say it but thank God for Zoom.

Educators have figured out how to teach while not together in a classroom. As Erica Schatz said last week in Children's Time, children have honed their listening skills. They have learned how to use technology. They have navigated a hugely difficult year and come out with new abilities.

Art has been harmed and enlarged by this year of isolation. We couldn't walk through museums and look at art close up. But we have been able to take virtual tours of museums from around the world. Plus, people's creativity has blossomed all over the world. I am mesmerized by the music and art I have seen people post on social media and YouTube this year.

Science displayed great agility in this pandemic. It had to move from who is right to what is right, working together with urgency to save lives. In the past it has taken 4 to 20 years to develop vaccines. In a record breaking 11 months, scientists working night and day while sharing information with each other, brought us a way forward. We stand in awe and gratitude. I asked the ensemble to sing *Earth and All Stars* as our opening song today in acknowledgement of the scientific community. It took a pandemic for me to want to sing a hymn that puts together gratitude for the universe and music alongside machines, loud boiling test tubes and labs. We probably need to add a verse about Zoom and technology.

Community and family connection had to change on a dime, and we did. We learned just how much we matter to each other and we figured out ways to keep community alive. In fact, we widened our connection to others. This year has given me the gift of connecting with people I have never actually met in person. A global pandemic that requires physical distancing cannot actually keep us socially distant. That is a misnomer.

This whole year required us to learn to live in the spirit of creativity in every aspect of our lives. It required us to create new songs, write new stories, make new connections, come up with new recipes, try new ways to exercise, new ways to communicatenewness filled the past 14 months of our lives. We have been forced to live artistically....and it is a good place to live.

In the scripture that Sarah read to us from the Gospel of Matthew the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables. He tells them that a story produces a readiness in a person that allows them to hear something new. Music does that. I have a playlist of songs that help me make sense of my losses. Music created a readiness in me that advice did not. Art allows us to see something new. Living in the spirit of creativity connects us with the Creator.

I believe that this past year called us to live artistically because:

1. We became more observant and a by-product of that was we became more appreciative. Kurt Vonnegut described his Uncle Alex, who after a particularly good meal or while watching a lovely sunset, would sit back and exclaim, "If this isn't nice, what is?" We have had a year of noticing those things we normally would miss in the harried lives we live.
2. When our old methods of doing things were no longer available to us, we improvised with what we did have available. I heard a woman quote her aged aunt who likes to say, "You do the best you can with the tools you have." By doing that we created newness...even with the weird items we got through InstaCart.
3. We allowed ourselves to be inspired by others. People shared how they were managing this time. We took the ideas of how they were coping and we adapted them to fit our needs.
4. We breathed deeper. Dawna and others have called us to live in our bodies and to use them, not only for work, but also for praise.

We have had a year of living artistically and that is true whether you are a physician or a sculpture, a teacher or a student, an engineer or a painter, a therapist or a poet, a parent or a child, retired or working, a grocery store clerk or a singer, a lawyer or a chef.

We have all become jazz musicians. We are playing together with the ability to improvise, feel the music and go with it in a new direction. We are painters creating a new art movement. We are storytellers creating a readiness in others through parables. We are composers living in a spirit of creativity with a new song on our lips. We are being called to live artistically.

We must not go back to "normal". With a sigh of relief, we must not try to recreate that which was not working well. Be artists. Live in a spirit of creativity. As life flows on, listen for the far-off tune that hails a new creation. Amen.

Benediction

God has put a new song in our mouths
Let us sing it!