**Not the End of the Song**

**Philippians 4:4-9**

The July 4th holiday weekend automatically raises important questions about the relationship between the church and the state, about what it means to be patriotic, as well as questions about what we, as followers of Jesus, owe to the state in terms of our allegiance and loyalty. This is the holiday where, as a nation, we supposedly celebrate big American concepts like freedom, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Every single one of these concepts has been threatened by recent Supreme Court decisions. These decisions will have a tremendous impact upon the well-being of women and families, the environment, the disenfranchised and people of color in the years ahead. They also challenge many of the values as this community of faith.

In the coming weeks we will address some of these profound issues. But not today.

Today I want us to focus inward and just be together as a community, as people who need and care for one another. Important though they are, I want us, for at least these short moments together, to try and release the pressures of pressing national and world crises, and simply dwell in the comfort of one another and find affirmation, strength and a certain resiliency in that presence.

It has been a hard several years. People have had to say good-bye to loved ones without being about to see or touch them. Students and teachers had to figure out new ways of learning. Individuals lost jobs. Travel was near impossible. Personal savings were eroded. Families were on top of each other. People were scared and irritable, worried and often frantic. Our nation was divided.

At the church, the staff had to learn a whole new format for offering worship services. Dawna and Susan had to figure out how to offer pastoral care from a distance and to be present without actually being present. The leadership of the church had to figure out rules related to covid and the best ways to keep people safe from a disease that no one fully understood.

Trying to make decisions and work within a context of unknowing and uncertainty made this time complicated and stressful for all of us, and especially for those charged with caring for a school or a company or a practice or a community or a church. No wonder we experienced what is being called, “The Great Resignation.”

Quite obviously our church has been impacted by this Great Resignation, as it lost two beloved pastors. On Friday as I walked into the church office, I noticed that Susan’s name had been taken down from the list of minsters on the doors as you enter the sanctuary. I felt this push on my chest that I recognized as surprise, sadness and a strange sense of dislocation. I can only imagine what that feels like to many of you who have walked past that sign for 20 years, seeing Susan Boyer’s name at the top of it.

Twenty years of ministry at a congregation is a long time. It speaks highly not only of Susan, but also of this congregation. After all, it represents a whole generation of births and deaths and changes and challenges and joys and disappointments. Susan was, and is, a remarkable pastor and human being. I already miss her in the office.

Henri Nouwen is a familiar name to many. He was a Dutch Roman Catholic priest whose own struggle with depression and loneliness led him to write eloquently about faith and connection, spirituality and pastoral care.

Nouwen wrote these words that I find helpful:

*Every time we make the decision to love someone, we open ourselves to great suffering, because those we most love cause us not only great joy but also great pain. The greatest pain comes from leaving. When the child leaves home, when the husband or wife leaves for a long period of time or for good, when the beloved friend departs to another country or dies … the pain of the leaving can tear us apart.*

He goes on to say:

*Still, if we want to avoid the suffering of leaving, we will never experience the joy of loving. And love is stronger than fear, life stronger than death, hope stronger than despair. We have to trust that the risk of loving is always worth taking.*

Susan has left her position as the senior pastor of this congregation. There is grief that accompanies such a loss, and we can’t help but feel that grief. It seems a good time to extend grace and gentleness to one another for as long as one might need it. Also in this tender time, I think it helpful to remind ourselves that the church is more than just a pastor. The church is us - a community that affirms the witness and teachings of Jesus and collectively chooses to live out that commitment with one another and in the world.

The church is all of us together striving, as Paul notes, to do whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. Jesus teaches that our desire to love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves is what matters. In short, the church is us, here, together, trusting that the risk of loving is always worth taking.

Many cultures and traditions have a phoenix story in one form or another. The phoenix is a beautiful bird that the ancients claimed was reborn time and time again from its ashes. It is a story, a myth, about dying and rebirth, of re-emerging and renewal, of transformation and growth in the face of adversity and loss.

In her beautiful poem, The Phoenix, May Sarton writes:

*No phoenix can be told,*

*This is the end of the song.*

*It struggles now along*

*Against death and self-doubt,*

*But underneath the bone*

*The wings are pushing out.*

There is so much love here, and goodness and care and strength and leadership and energy and even a healthy dash of good humor and humility. For sure, God is not yet finished with us. This is not the end of the song by any means. Underneath the bone, the wings are pushing out in this beautiful phoenix we call the La Verne Church of the Brethren. We’re going to be okay. All shall be well….all shall be well.

Thanks be to God.

Carol Wise

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