***The Thriving Church***

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At the end of my sophomore year in high school, my parents informed me that our family would be moving that summer. I was devastated. I had plans, hopes, dreams for high school. I was going to be first-chair flautist in the band, I was in chamber singers, we had an international concert tour scheduled—how could they do this to me? If they truly loved me, how could they possibly expect me to leave my friends and give up all my hopes and dreams? How could they destroy my life like this?

The devastation and betrayal I felt as a teenager pales in comparison to what I imagine the followers of Jesus must have felt after the Roman Empire executed him by crucifixion. What? How could this be? He was supposed to save us – he loved us. We had big plans. He was the Messiah, for heaven’s sake! What in the world do we do now?

And that is what I want to talk about today – how did this struggling band of Christ followers not only *survive* the devastating loss of their leader, but ***thrive*** in spite of it? How were they able to overcome the barriers of social class, ethnicity, and gender – as well as the violence and oppression of the Empire – to become a flourishing community dedicated to following the way of Jesus?

Now, I have to let you in on a secret first. I was a little surprised to see my sermon listed in the Summer Sermon Series on “troubling theologies.” What’s so troubling about thriving as a church? Yet the more I thought about it, there *are* some troubling aspects to how we might define a thriving church. Do we mean lots and lots of “people being saved,” as the passage in Acts says? When Jesus said, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly,” does this mean wealth and health are in my future, if I just believe? That is indeed troubling.

So what *did* Jesus mean when he said, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly?” The Greek word for “abundantly” that Jesus uses in this passage means “more than enough, much greater than anticipated, more than is necessary for survival.” And that’s what the followers of Jesus experienced: more than just surviving the devastating execution of their beloved leader, they were able to thrive – to come alive, to grow and develop, to experience more than they had ever thought possible and create such an attractive community that people around them wanted in on it. So how did Jesus’ followers do this? What was their secret?

First, let’s clarify who these followers of Jesus were. Our image of them is shaped by our current Western worldview. We think of them as “the New Testament Church.” Yet scholars who have examined the earliest manuscripts from the first two centuries after Jesus’ death have learned that followers of the Christ were actually loosely organized, highly diverse, small groups. They did not call themselves Christians, and they were not a “church.” They often called themselves Christ followers or followers of the Anointed One. They were people who created new chosen families for themselves and leaned into an alternative identity that enabled them to resist the violence and oppression of the Roman Empire. There are four secrets to their thriving that are confirmed in my own research as a community psychologist on what it takes to thrive in today’s environments that I think could be helpful for us to explore as a church.

The first is that they were committed to something bigger and more meaningful than their individual identities and life situations. Their commitment to patterning their lives after Jesus stood in stark contrast to the values of the Roman Empire. Rather than the *Pax Romana* that was the “peace” the Roman Empire offered as a result of conquering and oppressing everyone around them, these followers of the Anointed One were committed to the Empire of God, characterized by *shalom*, the “peace that passes understanding.” Osheta Moore, author of the book *Shalom Sistas*, describes shalom as “the breadth, depth, climate, and smell of the kingdom of God.” The Church of the Brethren’s historic commitment as a peace church reflects this vision of shalom as not just being the absence of war or conflict, but as what Brethren author Michael Gorman describes as “wholeness, reconciliation, goodness, justice, and the flourishing of creation.” Desmond Tutu, in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, adds “… participation in decision-making, goodness, laughter, joy, compassion, and sharing.” Thus, shalom is both personal and systemic. In shalom, the old structures and systems are replaced with new ones that enable *all* of us to flourish. That is what the early followers offered: an alternative vision of what the world could look like. Powerless as they were, their vision for the future as they followed the way of Jesus empowered them to forgive others, respond compassionately and generously to those in need, and help people see a future that gave them hope. *That* is what enabled them to transcend what were insurmountable barriers to others in their culture: race/ethnicity, social class, and gender. It created a sense of belonging, as their commitment to the way of Jesus meant that all were included. Women had strong leadership roles, and whether Jew or Greek, enslaved or free, they were one body.

What does this transcendent commitment look like for us as a church? I think the more we deepen our commitment to following the way of Jesus, the more we will be able to maintain our commitment to peace and justice. When we as a congregation are focused on learning more and more about how Jesus viewed people and interacted with them, we will have the strength and the courage to communicate this alternative vision of peace and justice to the community around us.

The second secret to a thriving church is involvement. Early followers of Jesus met every day in the temple and for meals, as well as in wisdom circles—kind of like our Connect groups: small groups sharing their values and principles through storytelling, highlighting how they saw God in the ordinary events of their daily lives. And certainly that principle is confirmed in my own research: it is only people who participate who feel a sense of community.

When I first visited the La Verne Church of the Brethren 19 years ago, I knew the minute I walked in that this was where I wanted to be—you all were singing “Spirit of Gentleness,” a song that was one of my favorites from my church in Philadelphia but which I hadn’t heard since moving to California. And of course, the preaching was compelling, the music was wonderful, so I kept coming back. But I never seemed to get to know anyone other than the pastor. People didn’t notice I was new. They had their own families and friends, and they seemed too busy to include me. I felt welcome, but I didn’t feel like I belonged. I started feeling sorry for myself.

After many months of my personal pity party, I stopped to think about what it might be like to apply some of my own research to solve this problem. I knew involvement created a sense of belonging, so I decided I had to get involved. I took a deep breath and decided to go to choir practice. Well, that was pretty scary, because the choir all had their own friends and their favorite seats, and everybody already knew each other and knew all the music. I was so tempted after the first week to never go back. But I did, because I knew it was the only way I would ever get to know people, and eventually I started to feel like I was part of not only the choir, but the church.

For those of you who have grown up in this church, you may never have had that experience of not feeling like you belong. But for anyone who is new, it’s really hard to get involved and feel a sense of belonging. That will be the case for our new pastor, and for those people who will be joining our church in the coming years. If you are one of those new folks, I encourage you to stick with it – pick something you want to participate in and just do it. And keep doing it! Know that we need you. We are so much better because you are part of us. For those who are no longer new, keep your eyes open. Notice. Reach out. Invite. Invitation is the key to the kind of involvement that helps a church thrive.

The third secret of a thriving church is interdependence. Not only are *your* needs met, but you are able to meet *others’* needs, as well. In the second chapter of Acts, *The Message* says “And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person’s need was met.” Really? They held everything in common and sold all they owned? That doesn’t sound very inviting to me—I don’t really want to give up all my stuff to be a follower of Jesus. Yet scholars tell us it is not that everyone sold all they owned and donated it to the church (remember—they were not “a church”). Rather, their approach was that their property, belongings, and indeed their very lives were not really theirs alone – they saw themselves as part of a new chosen family, and when family members were in need, you shared what you had. Sometimes that meant they sold a piece of land. Sometimes it meant they gave someone food or a place to stay. They responded compassionately and generously to the needs of others in their new chosen family, knowing that when they experienced a need themselves, someone would be there for them.

Rather than a scarcity mentality, fearing that we will never have enough, as is so typical of American culture, the worldview of Jesus in his culture and time was that all of creation was interconnected – an example of this is that when we take care of the earth, the earth takes care of us, a belief echoed in Native American teachings, as well. When we acknowledge that all of creation is interconnected, there is always enough. In fact, there is an abundance. In a thriving church we each contribute what we can to the needs of the church – sometimes that is a financial gift that supports the work we do together, sometimes it is clothing or food, sometimes it is our time and energy and presence. When each of us gives what we are able, particularly when we see a need, we are all cared for.

The final secret to a thriving church is trust. Trust is the foundation of all healthy relationships. When we trust someone, we believe that they will do what they say they will do and that they will act in our best interests and treat what is important to us with care. People tend to trust you when they believe they are interacting with the real you and that you are a person of integrity, when they have faith in your judgment and competence, and when they feel that you care about them. Trust transforms a community from being fearful to being loving.

The early Christ followers trusted that Jesus would do what he said he would do, they trusted that following in his footsteps would liberate them from the oppressive violence of the empire, and they trusted one another to do the next right thing. How do we as a congregation trust one another to do the next right thing in this season of change? I think trust is built on a spirit of generosity. As Brene Brown says, “our relationship is only a trusting relationship if you can assume the most generous thing about my words, intentions, and behaviors, and then check in with me.” This spirit makes all the difference. It means we can suspend judgment and talk honestly and directly with one another without damaging the relationship. As our congregation continues to become more diverse, this generosity of spirit will also help us be not only a compositionally diverse community, but truly an inclusive one, as the early followers of Jesus were. For when there is generosity and trust, people can bring their whole selves—and all of us are enriched by the different perspectives and experiences each one brings to the table.

And that’s the vision I want to imagine with you today: a La Verne Church of the Brethren that is thriving in much the same way the earliest communities who followed Jesus were—ways that are confirmed in research today. Transcendent commitment, involvement in the life of the church and community, meeting one another’s needs, and trusting one another for the next right thing. We want to be the kind of place where people feel they can contribute their whole selves and belong. We do this together, believing that by following the way of Jesus we can bring about a future where all creation flourishes. And people will say, “What’s their secret? I want to be part of that!” May it be so. Amen.