

“The State of the Church”

Jeremiah 17:7-8; John 15:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 29 2024

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might find an irresistible solace in this place that we can't help but share. Amen.

A year is a long time. Theoretically, in a “State of the Church” address given annually, I would sum up where God has led us in the past year, listing accomplishments and giving you numbers, in an attempt to measure what’s going on around here. It’s hard for me to see that as an appropriate way to assess congregational life though. Maybe I’m just not a numbers person. But in my experience in the church, the numbers of today don’t always have much to do with the numbers from a year ago, and are even less useful in predicting anything about the numbers a year from now.

That is why I keep coming back to these tree images, I think. Something more organic and adaptive like a tree just seems like a better reflection of the way church works. With numbers, we can too easily indulge in the fantasy that we’re making this happen ourselves. If we’re a tree, it is hard to forget that without the earth holding our roots steady, without the sun feeding us through our leaves, without the rain and the stream flowing by keeping our xylem hydrated – that is, without the Creator who makes life possible, there is no church. Without the Vine, there are no branches and no fruit. Without the Love in which we abide, there is no joy. What is the state of the church? We’re still here; we’re alive. God is love. God is faithful. Christ abides.

It is fair to say that, in many ways, we are in a moment that feels like a drought. Or perhaps like we've been heavily pruned. Losses have been sustained. Scarcity tempts us to worry. Opportunities that seemed like they might offer salvation have dried up. The numbers aren't pretty at the moment. That's why it's so important to remember that we are a tree. A tree planted by water, no less. We are not an organization or an agency. We are not a business or a club. We are church. We do not exist for ourselves, nor do we exist by ourselves. We are here because God has called us together, planted us in this place, and invited us into ministry. We are the branches, the leaves. Christ is the Vine that connects us to the steady earth, the sustaining sun, and the life-giving waters.

It can be hard to tell, in any given moment, if the loss and scarcity we're feeling is the cutting back of pruning or the drying up of a dead branch. The psalmists are such good teachers in this moment. The particular moment we're living in may feel like an ending. But if we look to the pattern of the psalms, we will be reminded to "recall the wonderful works of the Lord." The psalmist may be caught in a time of despair, but, they tell us, we always have the blessing of memory. We, too, can remember times when a loss made room for something new. We have seen panicky foreboding transformed into a sense of urgency that created openness to a new way of moving into the future. We have felt the relief of aligning our spirits with the Holy Spirit. We have seen what God can do. We may be feeling dry, but the stream of God's love is ever-flowing and near at hand. It will not fail to revive us. We just need to remember to trust.

Over the past few weeks, we had been having conversations with two different congregations about the possibilities of them moving into our space. This was exciting because we have, for a number of years now, shared a sense that this building is a blessing God wants us to share. But it also, to be completely honest, felt like something of a lifeline. We are going to vote shortly on a budget with a serious projected deficit. New congregations sharing our space and contributing to our bottom line seemed like something of a miracle. I was looking forward to bringing those new opportunities into the conversation today, as we affirm our plans for the new ministry year.

But in the last week, both of those conversations got shut down, as their leadership boards decided that now is not the right time for them to move. So here we are, left a bit hanging, back where we were before, which is feeling a little broke. But, my friends, we are a tree. We are followers of Jesus, taught to recall the wonderful works of God. We have been here before, and we are not on our own; indeed, we never have been. The budget you will be asked to vote on leans heavily on our “don’t panic” fund, which exists because of the faithfulness and generosity of those who have gone on before us. That’s what it’s there for. These times are urgent, but they are not panicky. We need to dig deep, deep into our memories of all those times when God brought life out of loss, blessing out of brokenness, hope out of despair. We need to wiggle our toes down into our roots, to turn our attention back to our connection to the True Vine, the One who connects us to that ever-flowing stream of God’s mercy and love. We need to look up and around, so we can see the places where we are, in fact, bearing fruit!

One of the great blessings of our congregational meeting always being scheduled on the second Sunday of June is that it's almost always going to be the day after Welcome Saturday. One benefit of that is I will likely be too worn out to get in the way of whatever it is the Spirit is trying to do in that moment! But the other blessing it provides is that I, along with some of you, have a fresh reminder of the beautiful fruit this congregation is bearing. Look at us! So tiny, so fragile and spare, but so scrappy, such a powerful magnifying glass for God's love. I keep telling y'all that you need to stop by and say Hi one of these Saturdays. It's because I want you to see what I see. The blessing, the gratitude, the camaraderie, the re-humanization, the learning, the life, the bacon, the sharing, the laughter, the depth of feeling of our neighbors who look forward to coming here each month because they know they will experience the unconditional love of God, as made real in biscuits and orange juice, and good-natured ribbing and hot showers and clean towels and ham sandwiches. I cannot fully express to you how vital this ministry is in the lives of so many people. You need to come see it for yourself.

I want to share a special word of thanks, though, because we have some folks that likely won't ever be able to stop by, and yet your presence is felt there. I am so grateful to those of you who are regular donors to Welcome Saturday, not because you're present every month, but because you believe and trust in what God is doing there and want to be part of it in the way you can. Thank you for your support! We couldn't do it without you. And if you've been thinking of starting such a stewardship practice, as a sign of

your trust and gratitude for what God can do with such a scrappy little church, I welcome you into that band of faithful supporters!

Church, I cannot tell you what the future will hold. I cannot predict how God is going to get us from here to there. I cannot explain to you how the numbers will balance out. All I can tell you is that I've seen them work out in ways that seemed unlikely before. I've seen empty spaces open up that appear momentarily like gaping holes of loss, only to have them filled in with new people, new ideas, new resources, and new ministries, the likes of which we couldn't have imagined before.

What is this moment? Is it a drought? It is the shock of a deep pruning? Whatever is going on here, it is a time to dig deep into our roots, to tap into the ever-flowing stream of God's mercy and love. To strengthen our connection to the True Vine and abide in Christ's love. To open ourselves to the ways new leaves may unfurl, in ways and places we might not have thought to look for. It is a moment for faithfulness not fear. Let us celebrate the fruit we are harvesting even now, and place our trust in the Vine-grower who will not disappoint us. Hallelujah and Amen.