

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | OCTOBER 24, 2021

JEREMIAH 31:7-9 | PSALM 122 | HEBREWS 7:23-28 | MARK 10:46-52

Last week, I was on a call with the bishop and some other clergy from around our synod. And those calls usually begin with the bishop asking us how things are going in the congregations we serve.

The answers aren't all that interesting. Some well, some not so well, most somewhere in between depending on the day. More interesting are the reasons why people give the answers they do. If things are going well, how do you know they're going well? And if things aren't going well, how do you know they're not going well?

There are a whole bunch of things that people look at to get a sense of how things are going. They keep an eye on the number of people who participate in worship every week. They look at how the confirmation kids are doing. They judge how much good the congregation is doing in the community. They examine how people are growing in roles of service and leadership.

Throughout the pandemic, I've been trying to get a sense for how things are going by looking at something a little different: how people talk about our community. And not just what people say, not whether people are doling out compliments or spewing complaints, but the mechanics of how they're putting their sentences together. When people talk about our congregation, do they start their sentences with *The church* or do they start their sentences with *We*?

That probably seems insignificant. But that little word choice reveals a lot about how people think of themselves in relationship to our common mission. It tells you the story they have in their head but aren't saying out loud.

When people start sentences with "the church," they're telling a story that assumes some distance. The church is something that exists over there. It's distinct from me. And I don't have much ability to shape it or change it or enrich it. If something good happens, I don't feel any real connection to it. And if there's a problem, I wonder why someone isn't taking care of it. If you think about church this way, you tend to use words such as "affiliated" and "volunteer" and "donate."

But when people start their sentences with "we," they have a different picture in mind. They're getting themselves involved. The church is something that I'm a part of. I can shape it. I can change it. I can enrich it. If something good happens, I feel proud of my contributions. And if there's a problem, I think of how I might help solve it. If you think about the church this way, you tend to use words such as "participate" and "serve" and "support."

That little difference in word choice reveals a big difference in perspective. And that different perspective is what stewardship is all about. We often think of stewardship as just anything that has to do with God and money, but it's really not. It's about how you locate yourself in relationship to God's mission. Stewardship is

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just what it means to see yourself as part of God's mission in the world. Stewardship is just what happens when you start your sentences with *We*.

That's exactly what this year's stewardship emphasis—Bound Firmly Together—is all about. And it's one we had to be really careful with. When Bill Whitney and I were planning this year's theme, we knew we wanted to emphasize "together," but we couldn't figure out exactly how to do it. Our first thought was "Back Together," but something about that felt a little off. Because it might make it sound like we haven't been together. Which we have. Or that we're just going back to the way things used to be. Which we're not.

And then Bill had a really good idea. We should focus on Psalm 122, which begins, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" This comes from what are called the psalms of ascent. And these were songs that were used during the pilgrimage people would take from their homes to the temple in Jerusalem. These psalms are filled with expectation and hope and a better future.

We typically hear Psalm 122 on the First Sunday of Advent, a time when we wait in hopeful expectation of God's presence. And this psalm has particular resonance for this community, which held its first service on the First Sunday of Advent. I imagine this psalm articulated some of the joy this congregation's founding members felt the first time they gathered for worship. What might the body of Christ might accomplish and bring forth in this place? And I imagine it says something to all of you who are present at this transitional moment as well. What might the body of Christ accomplish and bring forth now?

To be honest, if we'd picked this theme two years ago, it wouldn't have meant a whole lot. Bound Firmly Together? That's fine. Whatever. But we've had to put that belief to the test over the past year and a half. Are we actually a community of people who are firmly bound together? Or do we just say that when things are easy?

It's been a hard time for us as a community. It's been hard to postpone weddings and confirmations to some indefinite date. It's been hard to tell people that they can't come to your parents' memorial service. It's been hard for some people to learn to communicate their needs, to learn that it's okay to ask for pastoral counseling or visitation. It's been hard to come up with guidelines that minimize risk while still allowing us to do some basic things. It's been difficult. And it's okay—good even—to acknowledge that.

And going to the house of the Lord, creating this community of word and sacrament and mutual consolation, has looked different over the past year and a half. Sometimes we came to the house of the Lord in a pre-recorded service. Sometimes we came to the house of the Lord on zoom. Sometimes we came to the house of the Lord outside on the lawn. Sometimes we came to the house of the Lord in the sanctuary. The location changes. The guidelines change. The details change. But we've always come to the house of the Lord bound firmly together.

We've come a long way, and we've done a lot of good work together. And it's not because we have some special skill or unique talent or some rare gift. It's because we believe that we've been bound firmly together. You know that. I know you know that. Because even though it's been difficult, you still start your sentences with *we*. You still see this as your community, that you get to shape and form and enrich. You still ask *How can we inspire people? How can we strengthen systems that support God's people? How can we give hope?*

And as long as we're asking how we can do that, we're doing okay. It doesn't mean everything's going to be perfect. It doesn't mean we won't have disagreements. But it means that we're staying focused on what really matters, and how God is working in and among all of us together.

But here's one more reason I like this psalm as a way to think about stewardship. I like it because it's an invitation. "We are going to the house of the Lord." This is not a psalm about "the church." It's a psalm about us. It's a psalm about God's people who are bound together on the way. It's not a psalm about people who are bound together because they get along all the time. It's not a psalm about a group of people who like each other. It's not a psalm about a group of people who agree on everything. No, it's a psalm about a group of people who have been firmly bound firmly together because God is leading them to the same destination.

They're going to the city of God. And so are we all.

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