

Growing in Mystery

In the summer of 2012, Kristin and I were travelling the country to study churches, and we stopped for a week in Rhode Island to spend some time at St. David's on the Hill Episcopal Church. Originally, we had asked for names of churches that people were excited about in their dioceses, but St. David's was different. The priest there, Rev. Peter Snow, heard about our project and sent an email expressing his interest and support of what we were doing – not expecting that we might visit. When I asked after his church, he explained how they were going through a challenging time and in the middle of exploring the possibility of merging with another congregation. This didn't perfectly fit our profile, but my interest was piqued, and we decided to make a visit.

At St. David's, we found a caring group of people with long-standing commitment to their church and one another. But under the surface, something else was going on. In interviews with parishioners, I asked questions about how the church connected with their spiritual lives only to find myself listening to a detailed point-by-point presentations of why the other church should be the ones to sell their building. I attended a vestry meeting, and every item on the agenda became a diving board into this collective anxiety they all shared. They talked at length about the pros and cons of the two buildings, they compared the downtown ministries of the other congregation to their own more suburban style of doing church, they explored their history to find out what created this situation: every detail became a part of their frenetic processing. They saw what was happening in other places – churches closing their doors, merged congregations falling apart because they couldn't agree on whose china to use at coffee hour – and they wanted desperately to avoid those things, so they went over every question from every possible angle, hoping to find the key that would keep them from sharing that same fate.

It all reminded me of a book several years ago called Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (and What it Says About Us). It was a fascinating exploration of how traffic patterns are the projection of our unconscious desires and fears in life. You probably already know this on a gut level, but the passing lane on the freeway is a veritable billboard for displaying insecurities and frustrations. As in so much of life, emotions wreak havoc on what would otherwise be a fairly logical and civil enterprise.

I enjoyed the book well enough, but one part really stuck with me. When people in simulators are put in a situation that would cause most people to crash, a hardy few fare much better than the rest of us. It seems the standard human reaction to an impending catastrophe – whether it be a herd of deer in the road or a life-changing diagnosis – is to focus intently upon the thing we *don't* want to happen. So drivers will see an overturned car on the road and lock their eyes on it while they slam on the brakes and skid towards it. And guess what happens? Boom. The people who don't crash, though, are the ones whose eyes are in a different place altogether. Rather than staring intently at the obstacle, their eyes busily scan the scene for a way *around* the problem. It turns out you can be surprisingly creative when you realize that smashing your car is just one option among many.

Parker Palmer took this idea in a slightly different direction when he applied it to leadership. When a person or group decides that they, and they alone, are fully responsible for ensuring a positive outcome, it quickly becomes exhausting. They comb over every detail, they try to bring others in – not to work alongside them, but to do exactly what they’re told, and over time they become depressed, resentful, and exhausted. The belief that “if anything decent is going to happen here, we are the ones who must make it happen” leads people to a kind of frenetic existence, where silence or inaction are interpreted as failure. Palmer has a term for this – he calls it “functional atheism.”

In the parables and prophecy that frame this week, both Ezekiel and Jesus talk about the growth of God’s Kingdom; but not as a frenzy of activity or a call for us to do more and more and more. If anything it is quite the opposite. Ezekiel is clear –the voice of God says, “I will plant it... I will accomplish it.” This isn’t an order, it’s a promise. Jesus portrays growth as a mystery: the farmer sows the seed, and then he doesn’t fertilize, doesn’t compost, doesn’t check the soil temperature, doesn’t go to Home Depot to compare watering timers... He goes to sleep. The seed grows, even though he doesn’t know how. There is certainly still more work to do – there will be a harvest – but that does not imply that rest is not an option.

Functional atheism, focusing exclusively on obstacles ahead – these are the ways we hamper growth in God’s Kingdom. We can fret over the seeds and fertilize and water endlessly, and we will certainly achieve some growth. Weeds are growth, right? But we aren’t here to grow weeds. Fruit doesn’t come from frenzy, and birds cannot nest where there is no silence. To a certain extent, it is our lot to wait in silent expectation. The Kingdom is a mystery, and it rarely functions on the timetable that I set out for it. So as we wait for the growth that only God can bring, we have some options. We can distract ourselves and go farther and farther afield looking for answers, for control, for safety, but we might be better off staying near to the seeds we’ve already planted, celebrating the in-between time as we prepare for the harvest.

After worship at St. David’s, I noticed a rope coming down from the ceiling in one corner in the narthex, its final few feet concealed behind a door that had been blocked open. I asked Peter if there was a bell, and if they ever rang it. “Yes,” he said, “there’s a bell up there, but I think there might be something wrong with it. No one has ever said anything about it, and I’ve never heard it ring.” A year later, I called back, and everything had changed. They ultimately dropped the merging process and instead focused on the things they most enjoyed about the church. They started having picnics on the lawn more often, celebrating services outside in the summer, and inviting the neighborhood community groups to use their building. They were growing in ways they had not expected. I couldn’t resist asking about the bell. “Oh yes, there’s nothing wrong with the bell,” he said, “except that now we ring it so hard sometimes that the rope comes off its track and somebody has to climb up into the tower and fix it!” St. David’s couldn’t control their fate, but they sure could enjoy it, and the harvest came anyway.