

Honoring One Another in the Body

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1 Cor. 12:7-14; Psalms 19

Rev. Laurie Crelly

East Church Grand Rapids MI

The Michigan Conference had a virtual Vitality Day on Thursday and I must say it was really good. The seminar with the author Susan Beaumont about her book “How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You are Going”. Susan has worked with hundreds of congregations around strategic planning, management and revitalization. She served as a senior consultant and writer for the Alban Institute and worked on organizational change for decades.

Her newest book, “How to lead when you don’t know where you are going,” addresses the issue of the in-between times of life called liminal space. The word liminal comes from the Latin word that means threshold, that space where you are moving from one room or context to the next, a transitional time that is neither here nor there. All of us experience such spaces several times in life. Sometimes intentionally created, other times it is more of a season as we move from one identity to another. Intentional liminal times are such things like taking a retreat, mission trip or an overseas learning experience. Seasons of liminal space could be puberty, the shift from education to career life, pregnancy to birth, planning for retirement and so forth. A third kind of liminal space is times of epic change, where major events may trigger a restructuring of how we view our world and life together. They may happen over time like the rise of industrial age, or in an instant like the impact of 9/11.

When I consider where East Church is at this time, I would say we are experiencing three different liminal events. The first liminal space comes from the transition between pastorates and addressing the current reality of our congregation. All interim periods are liminal as a church works toward finding a new settled minister. As your newly called pastor I have come along side you to help catch hold of the vision and help us

implement that calling. Our liminal space is lingering as we grow in our understanding and trust as a community. But usually that means we would begin exploring new ideas and strategizing a growth plan. But as you know, this transition has been hampered by another liminal space we are experiencing as a society and world called COVID.

COVID has disrupted most of the familiar ways we interact as a church and community, and it is unpredictable. We have made advances in learning to adapt and regain some form of normalcy, but it seems like just as we settle into a pattern we get thrown a new variant that kicks us back once again. Some say we need to learn to live with COVID as an ongoing element of life. If that is true then we need to be asking, how can the church adapt and adopt new ways of being to care for our community better? Even now we are asking how do we reach out and care for one another in the midst of this?

The third liminal space we are living in is a shift in what Christianity is today. This is a monumental shift that Phyllis Tickle calls the Great Emergence. This kind of shift happens about every 500 years according to Professor Tickle and other religious historians. It is when the church reconfigures what it means to be the church. The last great shift was the Reformation when we saw the birth of Protestantism and the reform of the Catholic church. Some describe this time as a Giant Church Rummage sale where we clean out those things that are no longer relevant or effective and make room for the new ways of understanding faith. The difficulty today is that it is still too early to know exactly what the church is becoming, but we certainly can see the shift happening all around us or even within us. We hear things like Emergent Faith, deconstruction, ex-evangelicalism or the most common catch phrase “spiritual but not religious” and we get a glimpse of this liminal space. We hear faithful people seeking to rediscover a deeper faith and calling out the ways that Christianity has been complicit in advancing ideologies contrary to the teachings of Christ such as imperialism, dehumanizing of others, nationalism and all kinds of corruption. So what do we do as faithful people, as faithful Christians while in these liminal spaces?

According to Susan Beaumont, we need to make a shift in the way we approach faith and ministry in order to effectively respond to this liminal time. Instead of fighting against it, we need to surrender to the move of God. We need to slow down and become more attentive to the Spirit and realize that we don't have all the answers. It reminds me of how we adapt our way of living in the wintertime; we slow down, we are more aware of what is happening around us, we may need to change plans as a blizzard comes. We check in on one another, be more neighborly, we curl up to a good book, eat comfort food and tend more to the soul in winter. Like winter, these times of liminal space are times of tending to the souls of one another, read the good book and reflect on the things of God more.

We find these qualities in today's scripture readings also. Psalm 19 is full of reminders of why we need to stay grounded in the scriptures and the importance of meditating, praying and proclaiming our faith, even in the midst of difficult times. The psalmist writes "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes." The final verse of Psalm 19 should be our heart prayer in this time of discernment. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." This posture of trust and seeking understanding is vital as we weather this season of transition. Psalm 19 reminds us to anchor our hearts in the Word of God as protection against the anxiety we may feel.

We need to remember this journey is not just on an individual level, but, as Paul reminds us, it is the work of the whole Body of Christ. Our reading from Corinthians calls on us to cherish and value the Body of Christ, all of it, Paul writes "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." He goes onto say, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."

We are all valued members of the Body of Christ and it will serve us well to remember that as a congregation as well. To do so will require that we listen intently to one another, seek to love one another more deeply and reflect deeply on what God reveals to us in the Good Book for us as a community of faith. Discerning the will of God is a group project of discernment.

As I started this new call, I was eager get ready to emerge out of COVID ready to connect with the community, draw in new people and help fill a spiritual void we are sensing around us. But some of you have come to me expressing concern that I was moving too fast. At first I resisted this notion. But lately I have come to agree that perhaps we need to deepen our connections more before launching out into new and bold initiatives. This seminar about Liminal space confirmed to me that we truly are in a liminal space and we need to approach this time differently.

Finding ourselves in a liminal space is not always easy. But I know it is necessary for us at this time. We need this time to be grounded in faith, renewed in spirit and to be able to receive from God a vision for the future of East Church. Let us be of one mind, body and spirit as we wait upon God to lead us forward.

Let us treat this liminal time as a spiritual winter for the church. Let us shift our behavior for the conditions around us. Slow down, check in on one another often, deepen our connections to one another, curl up with the good book, meditate as we drink in the warmth of the spirit and watch for the signs of God at work in the world, trusting that spring is coming once again.