

I must admit to feeling a little overwhelmed. In *Keeping in Touch* I wrote: “Epiphany is all about the church shining its light into the world. Looking at the First United calendar for the next five weeks, it appears to be ablaze with opportunities,” and then listed all the things coming up between now and the end of February. When I say that I’m feeling overwhelmed, I don’t mean in the negative sense of feeling like I’m drowning or not being able to keep up. Rather I am overwhelmed by a sense of wonder at all the ways this little congregation is living out its Epiphany mission. By the end of February, which will actually take us out of Epiphany into Lent, we will have, among all our usual activities:

- observed Reconciling in Christ Sunday and Evolution Sunday;
- participated in the Souper Bowl of Caring;
- celebrated the 20th anniversary of the ordinations of Jeff Johnson, Ruth Frost, and Phyllis Zillhart;
- had Second Sunday School, in which kids learned about Christian meditation;
- had Second Sunday School for adults, in which our teaching parish student shared her experiences with two “emerging churches” she visited as her January term project;
- hosted a major interfaith conference, including an interspiritual worship service

I ended my *Keeping in Touch* reflection by saying, “Whew! How exciting! How brightly the light shines!” And I want to be clear here; I’m not spending my days thinking up new projects for us to do or more ways to ask you to invest our energy. I’m not saying that we should be bragging about how active we are or pushing us to take on more than we can handle. But I am saying that when a congregation is striving to be an Epiphany church, that is committed to shining the light of Christ into the world, then we should say so. We should claim our mission to be a strong, brilliant beacon. All too often, the idea of the church shining its light is more like, as someone once described it, a neon sign with half its letters burnt out, some of them blinking and flickering “hurch . . . urch . . . hurch . . . urch . . . its light broken and bent and dim,” *

And we don’t have to look too hard for the reasons; just tune into the latest rantings of Pat Robertson. At its worst, the Church has been the bearer of bad news rather than good to many marginalized people throughout its history, and indeed to the earth itself. Many people want nothing to do with an institution with a history such as ours – or its leaders. In a recent Gallup poll, clergy were lumped in with bankers as hitting a new low in honesty ratings, the lowest percentage it has been in the 32 years Gallup has measured it.

And unfortunately, oftentimes, even in the absence of abuse, there has been apathy, or the commitment to doing it the way we’ve always done it, to maintaining the status quo or dying in the process. And all too often, there are internal conflicts – although we shouldn’t be surprised by that. The gospel reading describes Jesus’ first public sermon. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus proclaims his mission as God’s messenger: to bring good news to the poor, set free the captives, heal the sick, liberate the oppressed, and proclaim the year of Jubilee. In next week’s gospel, we get the crowd’s response to the message: they run Jesus out of town and try to throw him off a cliff.

And Paul, in Corinthians, describing what it means to be in community, because obviously they were having their disagreements. There he was, just a few years after Jesus had gone around dismantling boundaries and hierarchies – and people in the churches were already thinking that some of them were better than others, with more important gifts than others, creating a new structure of ins and outs. It happened that quickly. Which is why we can’t boast. We too have to listen as Paul called the Corinthians back, instructing them gently but firmly about where all those gifts come from in the first place.

We always have to remember that the power behind the church is the Spirit of Divine Wisdom. I've often said that the greatest proof for the divine origin of the church is that it still exists. Left to our own devices, we would have destroyed it a long time ago. As it is, the church's light has often been "broken and bent and dim." And yet it has managed to continue "giving off its light with its witness to the world's need for the grace of God." *

Even in small congregations. Being small is our biggest challenge. Being careful not to overload the leadership and membership, discerning what we are able to do and what we are not, being realists at the same time as being visionaries, beaming the light out into the world, while tending to the fires of our own hearts. Accepting the limitation of being small, while also reaching out to attract new people to our community. That's who we are. Some days it might seem like we are just a little a neon sign blinking and flickering in the darkness.

But today I am overwhelmed that a congregation the size of ours is doing all that we are doing. When I got the e-mail yesterday from Orion with *Keeping in Touch* attached, I replied back: "If I didn't already belong to this church, I'd join it!" And again, this isn't bragging – not too much anyway. Because I know how hard it is a lot of the time. We are small. We do have limits to our time and energy. We do have different ideas about the ways things should be done. But we also have a good sense of what the mission is supposed to be.

When Jesus opened the scroll and read from Isaiah, essentially declaring his mission statement and ours, he gave us a clear mandate. The work of the followers of Jesus (what would become the Church) was going to be about reaching out to others with the liberating news of God's grace, with the comforting news of God's compassion, with the empowering news of God's justice.

So when I look at our schedule for the next five weeks, I see:

- RIC Sunday – a resounding “No” to the exclusion of glbt people in all aspects of the church and a beacon of welcome to all of God's beloved children;
- Evolution Sunday - a resounding “No” to a Christianity that creates a dichotomy between faith and science;
- Souper Bowl of Caring - a commitment to a compassionate partnership with those in need, in the same vein as our partnerships with *Welcome* and the *Night Ministry*;
- a celebration of the “Yes!” of the extraordinary ordinations 20 years ago, and all those that have followed;

And then I see things that maybe we're not too sure about yet, but are open to learning more:

- continuing to explore new ways of being the church, hearing about Valerie's experience in “emerging” churches;
- inviting Orion to share his practice of Christian contemplation with our children;
- daring to expand our understanding of the body of Christ to include those of other faiths;
- and even openness to maybe new practices of prayer and meditation for ourselves.

Jesus said, "Today the Scriptures are fulfilled in your hearing." Today. Some days it might be hard to see it. Some days it might seem too overwhelming in the sense of not being able to keep up. But even then, we remind ourselves of the Spirit of Wisdom and Power that fuels this ministry. And we remind ourselves that: today, right now, God is freeing and healing and liberating. And that Jesus is inviting us all into that work as well - today. Amen

* Debbie Blue, “Reflections on the Lectionary,” *The Christian Century*, January 12, 2010.