

## “Can People Tell What Inspires Us?”

Friends (long-time and new), let us pray. God, you are Love; and you are the Breath of life. We welcome your life-sustaining presence among us as we wonder together on this second Sunday or Easter: can people tell what inspires us? We long for fuller clarity as we witness to your loving presence empowering our individual lives and the life of this congregation. As your Holy Spirit stirs our minds and our hearts, grant us serenity to accept things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Friends in Christ, our scripture readings for this morning invite us to reflect on our “why” – or “why” for People’s Congregational Church and for our individual lives.

A group or individual “why” is sometimes well articulated within a purpose or vision statement. And sometimes why (the motivation, the inspiration) is hidden within the who and how of a purpose or vision statement. Throughout the current academic year, I have been participating in a cohort of 15 faith leaders serving in local congregations, predominately throughout Minnesota. Our learning process has been through the Leadership Center for Social Justice at United Theological Seminary in St. Paul.

In a recent workshop, we viewed a very famous Ted Talk in which speaker Simon Sinek stated unequivocally, *“People don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it. And what you do simply proves what you believe.”* In between the why and the what lives the how – that is, the process or way we go about our work. When people in the St. Croix Valley observe People’s Congregational Church, they more than likely observe our “what” and they might begin to sense our “how” (the way we go about or endeavors). I wonder: **on average, would someone who attends worship or another event of our church for a first time gather a sense of our “why” – our inspiration for our way of life?**

In regard to our individual lives, I wonder: **would someone with whom you engage in a spontaneous elongated conversation at the library, the grocery store, or coffee shop come away with a sense of your “why” – your inspiration?**

In a moment, we will consider how the scripture readings for today might accompany us in considering our “why.”

At this juncture, I invite our attention to the questions on our sermon response page. We heard the Psalmist share these words: *“I look to those who are at one with You and learn from them of your ways”* (Ps. 16:3). What ways of God do you aspire to show to people with whom you cross paths? You may choose to add this further prompt there: **“What IS my why!?”**

We heard this in the gospel narrative: *“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” [Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”* When you think of Jesus sending you into the world on behalf of God (divine parent and source) and empowered by the Holy Spirit, how do you feel? What does it cause you to wonder? You might add these further prompts there: **Who is God? Who am I?**

On this second Sunday of Easter, we sometimes feel a dip in energy after the intense joy of Easter Sunday. What can compare with such a large portion of a community gathered on Easter Sunday for the joys of sunrise, breakfast, egg hunt, and worship with brass accents? As with the seasons of Advent, Christmastide, Epiphany and Lent, the first Sunday of Easter is a threshold moment. At its best, last Sunday’s message that we made together as Easter Sunday called us to attention so that we will be ready to engage in the fullness of resurrection power throughout seven Sundays of the Easter season that lead toward Pentecost.

*“Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”*

*When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20:21-22)*

In this season of Easter, we celebrate the risen Christ. We celebrate the one individual, Jesus, whose love appeared again and again to his friends after death. That Jesus was one who so distinctively embodied God's love and justice. In fact, that is what Christ means – anointed one, the chosen one, the embodiment of God's love.

**Do you give your life to Christ?** This is a common question in the worldwide Christian community. Have you given your life to Christ. If we have, then we believe that we are also able to embody resurrection power of love and justice. Giving our life to Christ is our "why."

Let us take a moment to look at the vision we express. I invite you to look at the back of the bulletin – at the very bottom we see our visual logo, our congregation of people in bright rainbow colors and then we see one iteration of our vision. It says, "An inclusive community, celebrating God's unconditional love through engaging worship and faithful service." I'll admit that I've been a bit confused in my first two years as to whether we have one, two or three vision statements. But that is a compelling one.

And then I invite you to pull out this pew info card with me. We're going to take a moment to look at it together. On the back side, you'll see a visual made in the past ten to 15 years of how we are approaching Christian ministry here. Let us read from the bottom. Let's reading in the blue box our foundation: *"Christianity – God is revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and expressed in the Trinity – God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit."*

Let us continue to explore our collective vision. Let's read together our "Expression" in the purple box. *"We express our faith through worship, spiritual growth in small groups and mission, which benefit the broader community."* Be watching (as we read through) for our "why" and also our "how" and our "what."

Let's read "Our Vision's Pillars."

- *"Music and the Arts – We express our spirituality through music and the arts. And we believe that Christ conveys meaning and beauty through human creations."*
- *"Environment – We express our spirituality through the celebration, caring and nurturing of the natural environment which affirms Christ's presence."*
- *"Inclusivity – We express our spirituality through welcoming those from all walks of life. We cherish the wonder and promise of human diversity."*

And, interestingly, at the top of our building is the who we are: "Faith, Freedom, Fellowship": *"People's Congregational Church is a community of faith that believes in social justice, compassion, mercy and tolerance. We accept diversity, care for the poor and oppressed, and question tradition when appropriate."*

And then at the very top of this card (in italics, under People's Congregational Church vision), let's read that statement: *"Rooted in tradition and forward-thinking to embrace the future."*

We can be so grateful to many (who are gathered via live stream and in this room) who put thought into defining for ourselves our "why," our "how," and our 'what fruit might come from that' in years past and as it continued to guide us. We can tell at this inflection point in 2023 that we can always review and continue to understand and expand our understanding of how we are in this community.

I also believe it is important for us to each as individual Christians consider our own why. It often by thinking carefully about who the specific beloved person is that God created you to be. I have done a purpose statement exercise with confirmands multiple times in the past decade at my former church. I will share with you my one-sentence statement of purpose, which came from the question 'who am I?' and around it developed the how and the what.

I said, *"I am a co-creator of connective relationships within community."* We each need to have our own purpose statement that comes from our sense of how we might embody the risen, loving, just energy of the Christ.

The disciples were in grief. The disciples were, for good reason, behind locked doors. They didn't want to lose the feeling of excitement from the journey with Jesus. They wanted to hope beyond hope at the experiences of seeing Jesus again that were related to them from friends. They wanted to move forward as disciples, continuing to follow that Jesus energy of the risen Christ.

In our companion text to Psalm 16, we also heard, *"My delight increases each time I sense your Presence within me."* Again, let us look in coming time to what our "why" is and how we will each embody the love of Christ.

I invite you now to a closing blessing in this time of reflection – to close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so and to hold your hands open, relaxed, in a posture of receiving.

This is a poem entitled "Beloved Is Where We Begin" by Jan Richardson from a collection called *Circle of Grace*. Let it speak directly to you.

*If you would enter  
into the wilderness,  
do not begin  
without a blessing.*

*Do not leave  
without hearing  
who you are:  
Beloved,  
named by the One  
who has traveled this path before you.*

*Do not go  
without letting it echo  
in your ears,  
and if you find  
it is hard  
to let it into your heart,  
do not despair.  
That is what  
this journey is for.*

*I cannot promise  
this blessing will free you  
from danger,  
from fear,  
from hunger  
or thirst,  
from the scorching  
of sun  
or the fall  
of the night.*

*But I can tell you  
that on this path  
there will be help.*

*I can tell you  
that on this way  
there will be rest.*

*I can tell you  
that you will know  
the strange graces  
that come to our aid  
only on a road such as this,*

*that fly to meet us  
bearing comfort  
and strength,  
that come alongside us  
for no other cause  
than to lean themselves  
toward our ear  
and with their  
curious insistence  
whisper our name:*

*Beloved.*

*Beloved.*

*Beloved.*

Friends, may this reminder of your belovedness at the core of your identity be what inspires your faith (our trust and hope), as we strive (individually and together) to have loving and just Christ-like impact in our wider communities, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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April 16, 2023 (2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter)  
Psalm 16, John 20: 19-31