



S – I was baptized in a Presbyterian church in 1945. I entered ministry through a long journey of discernment, as I moved from being a youth group leader to Commissioned and Licensed Ministry and finally to ordination exactly two years ago this week-end.

Vince and I also share much in common, especially in our spiritual journeys. We both grew up and were confirmed in churches that were a central meaningful part of our lives.

V – We each had youth group leaders and pastors who saw our gifts for leadership and ministry and who explicitly affirmed those gifts. And both of us were exhilarated by our first tastes of the deconstruction and reconstruction of what the Bible is all about.

S – For us, the church is and has been the central pivot of our lives – the anvil of our growth, the labyrinth of our spiritual journeys, the community in which we serve and from which we receive hope and care.

V – And we both believe in the God who is still speaking, providing new truth and new light in our spiritual journeys.

S – In trying to answer this question about the future of religion and of the institutional church, we both look to the past to find clues to the future.

V – Most people who were wondering about the future of the Church were asking the question, “What can the Church do to survive?” But at a recent ministerial staff workshop where we focused on powerful questions that begin with “how” or “why,” we realized that our question about the Church’s future was not “What can the Church do to survive?” but “Why should the Church survive?”

Neither of us see a value in the Church continuing just for the sake of continuing, so why do we believe there should be a Church of the future at all?

S – From my perspective, the institutional church is and has been at its best when it stands on the integrity of its call: when it stands for justice, equality, mercy, and care for those in need; when it stands for forgiveness, prayer and the power of spiritual community.

The institutional church is and has been its best when it stands on the integrity of this identity and is not subsumed by the current culture or by the current politics or government.

V – One of my favorite theologians, Stanley Hauerwas, is fond of saying that the first task of the Church is to be the Church. By this, I think he means something like what you’re saying about the Church standing on the integrity of its identity. I believe the Church is the Church- when it shares its peculiar witness, when it offers something clear and distinct, a different way of life. This is the lesson I draw from our scripture today about being salt and light. Do we have something different to offer? Are we able

to season the world? Do we have a light to let shine? These are the questions the Church has to keep asking.

My own sense of Christian history is that the Church began as a funky little community, way out of the mainstream. The word Christian actually began as an insult; it means little Christ, and the early church was being made fun of for trying to be a bunch of little Jesuses. The Roman governor, Pliny the Younger, was one of those who didn't know what to make of this weird little sect. Part of his job was to conduct legal proceedings against the little Jesuses, and around 112 CE he wrote to his boss, the emperor, about their strange practices:

"They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food--but food of an ordinary and innocent kind."

He has to add this last part about ordinary and innocent food partly because others were accusing the early church of being cannibals who ate flesh and blood. Pliny is happy to report this isn't true, but the Church is doing some counter cultural things. They are meeting early in the morning, singing songs, and making promises to one another that they will not defraud, not steal, not commit adultery, not lie, and coming back together later for a potluck. I believe this is the Church being the Church. And I believe there have been moments like this throughout the history of the Church.

One of the times in my own life when I have seen the Church being the Church was in a Mennonite congregation where I interned one summer. That church was located in one of the most diverse zip codes in the country and one of the last bastions of affordable housing on the north side of Chicago, but gentrification continued to move north and threatened to push lower income residents further west, away from social services, jobs, and public transportation. When one of the low-cost buildings in the neighborhood went up for sale, likely to be converted to expensive condos, the church decided to buy the building in order to keep it affordable and allow their neighbors to stay in the neighborhood. Doing so meant a large mortgage for the church and higher rents for church members who lived in other buildings that the congregation owned, but they bought the building, believing that it was the just thing to do.

Of course, the Church does not always do its job of being the Church faithfully. There are many periods in its history when much of the Church failed to provide a counter cultural witness and instead identified itself with the prevailing powers of the culture to the detriment of the values of love and justice.

S – I agree, Vince, and I see this grand symphony of the church throughout history: those crescendos when the church is at its best, being the church; counter-melodies when the church is held accountable by individuals and groups who call forth change; and full stops when the church disregards the alternative voices of transformation, leaving those voices to trail off into what at first seems like silence.

In 1517, Martin Luther, a German priest and professor of theology, took a strong stand disputing the church's claim that absolution from sins could be purchased with money, a practice of the time called indulgences. Luther's challenge was to both the church and the Holy Roman Empire. His refusal to retract his opposition led to his excommunication by the pope and condemnation as an outlaw by the emperor. It also led to the Protestant Reformation, a call for the church to return to its belief that redemption is a gift of God's grace.

One moment I saw the church reclaiming its call, standing apart from culture and politics, was when I took part in the New York March for Peace in 1967. I had never marched or protested anything publicly, and I was scared. Yet I believed passionately it was important to stand up and be counted. That moment was an epiphany of faith for me: faith in the power and the witness of the church at large, as I walked with hundreds of ministers, priests and rabbis and folks who were part of all faith traditions - proclaiming to our government, to our nation, to the world - our commitment to peace. In the heritage of Martin Luther, my vision of what the church **could** be changed.

A very different historical example occurred in 664, when representatives from two church missions in the British Isles came together by decree of the King to attempt to resolve their theological differences. The Roman Catholic mission based its authority in Rome and they advocated ecclesiastical unity, listening for God in the ordained teachings and the life of the institutional church. The Celtic Christian mission based its teachings on the Gospel of John, advocating the mystical traditions of the Bible, listening for God at the heart of life and in all of creation. Ultimately, the King decided in favor of the Roman mission, and the formal Celtic missions were dissolved. While this Celtic belief in the goodness of creation and the mystical presence of God was officially silenced, it survived like an underground stream in the Christian church.

As I grew up in the Lutheran church, my faith development was strongly influenced by the power of ritual and of what I would now call mysticism (although I didn't know that word then). It was the rigidity of Lutheran doctrine and the lack of commitment to social justice that drove me away from the Lutheran church as a young adult and into the arms of the United Church of Christ with its heritage of action and congregational autonomy. Yet fifteen years later, much like that stream of Celtic Christianity that had gone underground to survive, it was those earlier threads of ritual and prayer that I rediscovered and reclaimed to restore a missing piece of my spiritual life.

So what does this grand symphony tell us about why the church should survive in the future?

V - My sense is that the Church should survive if it can accomplish its primary task: to be the Church, even imperfectly. In fact, it won't exist unless, and to the degree that, it does. If the Church can be a community of contrast, of difference, a people willing to stand out and stand up for a God who rarely speaks with the voice of conventional wisdom or popular opinion, then it is as desperately needed today as in the time of Pliny and Luther. I believe the Church should survive by reclaiming its strangeness. To paraphrase the bumper stickers from Austin, TX, we must keep the church weird. And

as one part of that body, I believe we must always ask how we can be salt and light in our families, our communities, and our world.

S – The future of the church also depends on its people, individuals who consciously take responsibility for their faith. I believe that each of us has to name and then let go of the God we no longer believe in. I see so many people who cannot move on in their faith journey, because they are still so emotionally tied to the God that doesn't make any sense to them anymore.

The church should survive if its people are committed to the life-long process of discerning what they **do** believe in. This is more than a passive listening to someone else's sermon or vision; it is an active engagement with the questions raised and the beliefs expressed Sunday after Sunday within the worshipping community. The church of the future may be a leaner church, but I have a vision of a church filled with people who find and believe in the sacred – the sacred within themselves, within the world, and within their chosen communities.

The church should survive if it takes the integrity and power of its sacred rituals - like baptism and confirmation, communion and memorial services, Ash Wednesday, meditation and the Labyrinth – and opens those rituals to meet the unique needs and hungers of its congregations.

Vince – Yes, and also if individuals open themselves to having those needs and hungers shaped by the community of faith. It takes faithful individuals to remind the community of its true purpose and identity. And it takes a faithful community to shape individuals capable of being that reminder.

Sandy – Amen! I see it in the ways this community of faith, UCG, has shaped me, and shaped us, and in turn in the ways that we the continuing members, and you the newest members, also shape this church.

Vince- The Gospel of Luke tells this wonderful story of two people of faith walking down the road after the crucifixion, wondering if their faith can survive after the death of their leader. A stranger comes along, walks with them, and they talk about what has happened. But it is not until they sit down together, in communion, in community, and break bread with one another, that they recognize the stranger as Jesus.

Sandy- In that ordinary act of sharing ordinary food with anyone and everyone who comes to the table with us, the extraordinary and the sacred is revealed among us, like a flame of glowing fire and light.

Perhaps that is why the church should – and we believe will – survive.