

October 9, 2016
Romans 12:9-16
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“A Successful Church”

Good morning! I got an interesting invitation this week; an area pastor asked to interview me for a class he’s taking through the Training in Ministry program; a class in church administration. I wasn’t sure what kind of questions he might have, but I know and like this pastor, and I’m always game for a free lunch, so we set a time to meet. It turns out his assignment was to interview a pastor of a successful church.

We had some interesting reflection on what that even means. I confess the phrase “a successful church” makes me a bit uncomfortable. I can hardly even say it without putting air quotes around it. A “successful” church. It’s an adjective I’m more accustomed to using to refer to for-profit organizations, where success has some pretty standard measurements: such as, is this business profitable? What’s the bottom line? I’m not sure we can evaluate a church: either a denomination or a congregation in the same way. What’s our bottom line?

Is it the number of members and if that number is increasing? Does that mean if pastors, deacons and friends have spent months supporting a long-time member who is dying, that unsuccessful because when that member passes away we have one fewer member? If a successful church is one that manages its financial resources responsibly, does that mean that if a ministry team has a great idea but it exceeds their budget line, that’s not a successful ministry? Anyone who has ever cleaned their house for company knows that there are lots of things which are welcoming that no one ever notices unless they’re not done. Those of you who have been studying *Outrageous and Courageous* may remember the story in chapter 4 from the church whose bathrooms had been accumulating mildew for

years. The members of the church hadn't even noticed. When it was pointed out to them , a member of the church ferociously scrubbed the bathroom doors, and then said, "There! Now people from the neighborhood ought to start coming." Unfortunately, not everything which takes effort is likely to qualify us as successful. We're probably not going to generate buzz as "That church with the clean restrooms," or "That community which doesn't overspend its budget." Those things are important, but it's only when they're neglected that anyone is likely to comment on them.

Let me share some comments which I have heard, directly or indirectly:

- At the Jr High cross country meet at OxBow park, a parent asked a Creekside member: Aren't you the church that hosts the lunch for firefighters and police officers?**
- I'm part of a women's group at Camp Mack. There are about eight of us -- not a large group. When I introduced myself and said that I was a pastor a Creekside Church, a woman I knew jumped in and said, "Her church does wonderful things in our district! They hosted a benefit auction for Nigeria and had the Nigerian Women's choir there!" And another woman in that group, whom I had never met, said, "Don't you have a labyrinth at your church? I've walked that labyrinth."**

- **Just this week I was at the hospital and introduced myself to someone who asked, “Where’s your church?” I said “on CR 113, a bit west and south of Meijer,” and he brightened up and said, “I know that church! I was there for your Fish Fry this year!”**

Does being talked about -- in a positive way -- in our community, make us a successful church?

Here’s a modest proposal for a successful church. It isn’t my definition, and it doesn’t come from contemporary research on church growth. It may not be a complete definition, but it’s a good start. It was written nearly two thousand years ago by the apostle Paul to the fledgling Christian Church in Rome. Here’s what Paul says in Romans Chapter 12, beginning in verse 9: “Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” (9:9-13)

That, friends, is a pretty ambitious definition of a successful church. It’s notable for what it says, but also for what it doesn’t say. As we look at these verses and the ones which follow, it may be helpful for us to think of church as a community that balances belief, behavior, and belonging. How we think these things should interact, or which we think are more important will affect the character of our community. There is very little in this passage -- although plenty in other parts of Paul’s letter to the Romans -- about belief. There aren’t any doctrinal statements here about the nature of the trinity, the virgin birth, or bodily resurrection. But belief is important, isn’t it? Isn’t that what brings us together? A common belief that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior? A shared commitment to be Jesus’ followers? Do we all have to believe all the same things in order to be a successful church? That is a tough question; one which denominations are wrestling hard with. Can we be a successful church if we believe different things about the authority of scripture, women in leadership, our peace witness? How about the role of gay and lesbian people in the church, or gay marriage? What about social issues like abortion and gun control? Do we have to believe the same things about that?

Do we all have to believe the same person is the best candidate for the next president of the United States? What if we don't all vote the same way next month? (I can predict with 100% certainty that we won't).

Although there are core beliefs that I hope we share, I know there are, and always will be, places where we differ. I don't think belief can be the only measure of a successful church. One measure of a successful church is how we treat other people -- *especially* those who may not share all our beliefs. Our passage from Romans 12 is a bunch of directives about how Christians ought to behave: Hold fast to what is good, love one another, be ardent in Spirit, serve the Lord, rejoice, be patient, persevere, contribute to needs, extend hospitality. Verse 16 says, "live in harmony with one another." We are not directed to behave this way because it's easy, or it comes naturally, or it just makes sense. This kind of behavior is hard work. It takes practice. It is learned behavior, not automatic behavior. Blessing those who persecute us and extending hospitality to strangers is not natural -- it is counter-intuitive; it is intentional; it is Christ-like.

This kind of behavior is the only way a church can foster a sense of belonging which is different from belonging to any other charitable organization: the PTO, the music boosters, the athletic boosters. Those are all fine organizations; we participate in them and wish them success. They are fundamentally different than the church. Here's how: belonging to a successful church will change you. Churches are not simply places where people are nice to each other. Churches aren't even just places where we gather with people who share similar convictions about and commitments to Jesus Christ. A church is a place that creates space for transformation. That cannot happen without the gift and the practice of hospitality. In his book *Reaching out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Henri Nouwen writes, "Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place." Hospitality makes space for transformation. The people which hospitality changes first, are those who commit to practice it: those who are willing to risk seeing strangers as friends. I don't mean only strangers from our neighborhood who come to our doors, or strangers from other countries who come to our shores, but

also people in our midst -- sisters and brothers in Christ -- whom we have avoided or rejected. What kind of transformation would it take to restore those relationships? Not, how would *they* have to change, what kind of apology would *they* have to beg for, but what kind of transformation would it take for me to live in harmony so that love is genuine. Jesus Christ, and Christ alone can accomplish that transformation if we are willing to offer that space where change can take place. If we have the courage to open that space for Jesus Christ, we will be transformed.

And that, brothers and sisters, is the bottom line: a successful church is a church in which people are transformed by Christ. That's my definition, and I'm sticking to it. We are transformed by the hospitality which Christ offered us so that we can offer that hospitality to one another. Amen.