



Embracing Discomfort

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Looking around the room I feel young, and I don't think this is a good thing. Sitting in a sanctuary surrounded by my colleagues from around the Eastern Washington Idaho Synod it occurs to me, "I am still a young pastor." Having crossed over the threshold of my fortieth birthday, I no longer consider myself a young man, but I am a good quarter century away from retirement. I look around the room; a rough estimate tells me that sixty percent of my colleagues are within ten years of retirement. These are wonderful pastors who are doing incredible ministry, and I wonder how each of them is making sense of the shifting cultural landscape.

I am a young pastor, and even so I find that the world of ministry is changing so rapidly that I am not sure my congregation, or I, can keep pace. I feel old and out of touch. If I, one of the younger pastors in the synod, feel that way, how must others feel. We are awash in the statistics and stories of lost generations of Lutherans. I am overwhelmed by the laments of faithful pastors longing to find ways to draw millennials into the church. To be honest, the church I am serving looks nothing like the church I imagined when I started my journey toward pastoral ministry. I am a young pastor, and never in my nightmares did I imagine that simple questions of sustainability would dominate so much of the conversation among fellow clergy. How will this congregation, this synod, this church survive? This is not

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is often in conflict with the religious leaders of his day over questions of laws, observances, and rituals—religious things of deep comfort to the leaders. Without rejecting these things out of hand, Jesus wants our communities to focus first on the people around us, not our religious systems for their own sake.

what I was “sold” when I was encouraged to go to seminary. Not what I was sold, or what I was trained to do. It seems my seminaries had a very different church in mind when they were training me. Was I given the old bait and switch? At times I feel like Jeremiah, “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me” (Jer 20:7).

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I long to see my congregation grow, to see young families, with children, filling the pews and clogging the Sunday school. My congregation longs for this, the grandparents in my congregation especially long for this, but it is an unrequited longing. Millennials do not long for the church of the 1950s, '60s, or '70s. They aren't even sure that they are longing for church at all. When young people do try us on for size, the very same worship that can be rich, meaningful, and life changing for those already in the congregation often doesn't seem to fit. There is a disconnect.

At every point in history, there has been a generation gap. At every point in history, grandparents have looked at their grandchildren with total bewilderment. Yet, it would appear that, when it comes to matters of faith and religion, the generation gap that exists now within the American church is unlike any generation gap we have previously faced. Trying to build a community experience that appeals to, and connects, people from across these generations is a seemingly impossible task. As Bilbo Baggins would say, one is left feeling like “butter that has been scraped over too much bread.”¹ Those in the silent generation and millennials quite simply do not seem to experience faith the same ways.² As we move forward, the problems will likely only become exacerbated. With the pace of technological and informational advancements increasing at an alarming rate, I am left wondering if I will have anything in common with my grandchildren. When I answered the call to ministry, this is not what I signed up for. How does one create space for the silent generation, boomers, Gen X, and millennials to experience faith in the Living God, together?

My congregation and I find ourselves in a deep dilemma. We have seen congregations around us grow by focusing on a particular generation, finding

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 42.

² George Hawley, *Demography, Culture, and the Decline of America's Christian Denominations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), 37–38.

numerical success even among millennials. For years the homogeneous unit principle (HUP) has illuminated the path to successful missionary endeavors and church growth alike.³ The HUP suggests that, when trying to communicate the gospel, it is easiest to gather a group that has as many cultural experiences in common as possible. The more cultural expressions universally shared within a group, the more likely it is that the group will become magnetic to others who share those same cultural norms.

Is my congregation more likely to grow if we tailor our life together around a particular cultural subset in our community? We already connect well with the silent generation, but statistically growing a congregation by focusing on people over the age of seventy doesn't seem like a path to sustainability. Sustainability, is that why I am here? We could focus on a younger crowd, but would doing so inevitably mean abandoning ministry that is so valuable to the faithful congregation members who build our church? Our congregation is in a dilemma. We are convinced that when Paul describes the body of Christ, he is not suggesting that the church be formed into silos of hands, eyes, and ears all worshipping and living lives that are separated and insulated from one another (Rom 12:1–18; 1 Cor 12:4–31). No, Paul expects that each member of Christ's body needs the others. To be the church, we need the intersection of a diversity of cultural norms. Each generation needs the other more than we can imagine. We have no choice; we are called to be the place where divergent streams of social, racial, economic, and even generational norms converge and shape one another. But how?

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We confess that the gospel of Jesus Christ is universally true, effective, and necessary for all people, in all places, in every age. If, indeed, the good news belongs to all generations, it should have the power to bring generations together unlike any other reality. When it doesn't, we are forced to wonder, "What is it that we have attached to the Gospel that is getting in the way?"

Oddly enough, Jesus has something to say about this. Through the first half of the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus gradually establishes himself as a rabbi of influence. He lays out his theological framework in the Sermon on the Mount, differentiating himself from the common teachings of the time. He performs several miracles, including one on the Sabbath. He gathers and sends out disciples. Jesus establishes for himself a perceived authority unlike any other teacher of the

³ It is nothing new to critique the HUP, yet when I look at the churches being planted around North Idaho, it seems like congregations are targeting ever narrower cultural segments of the larger society. A recent attempt to "rehabilitate" the HUP can be found in Michael Moynagh, *Church in Life: Innovation, Mission and Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 2017), 219–36.

time. All the while the powers that be, the Pharisees and scribes, are watching. The powers that be are questioning (Matt 9:11), plotting (Matt 12:14), and becoming increasingly uncomfortable (Matt 12:24). Halfway through Matthew's Gospel, the establishment has had enough. When they finally decide that the time has come to intervene and challenge Jesus's status, where do they strike first? What accusation do they make to discredit this up-and-coming leader? Tradition. They accuse Jesus of disrespecting his elders by breaking with tradition, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat" (Matt 15:2).

Jesus's response has become, for me, a lens through which I seek to shape a faith community that builds up the body of Christ across the cultural disparities that make shared life challenging. A lens through which I interpret the changing church. Jesus responds,

"And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'" Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." (Matt 15:3–11)

The Pharisees and scribes had insulated themselves within their own little homogeneous unit. They shaped and interpreted traditions as a means of establishing a clear boundary between themselves and those whose cultural norms may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Pharisaical observance of the Hebraic law had become increasingly time consuming and expensive to the extent that it was impossible for anyone who was not among the upper echelons of the social and economic strata to keep up with them. Working class Jews simply didn't have the time or the resources to live "truly faithful" lives.⁴

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⁴ Donald A. Hagner, *The Jewish Reclamation of Jesus: An Analysis and Critique of the Modern Jewish Study of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock: 1997), 171–74.

In this case, the tradition is to wash hands, simple enough. In fact, my mother regularly reminded me to wash my hands before I ate, and I do the same for my children. In every restaurant I visit, I see in the bathroom a little plaque categorically stating that “ALL EMPLOYEES MUST WASH HANDS BEFORE RETURNING TO WORK.” I think we all can agree that personal hygiene is a good thing. While first-century Galileans may not have known what we know about germs, cleanliness is not a virtue new to the twenty-first century.⁵ With one question, Jesus’s opponents have publicly insinuated that Jesus does not honor the religious traditions and insulted his general character. Can you really trust someone with bad hygiene?

Why on earth would Jesus not teach his disciples to wash their hands? Didn’t Mary teach him better? While washing hands before a meal makes good sense, applying this rule as a standard of religious purity was a stretch. There are instructions regarding the washing of hands within the Mosaic Law (Exod 30:17–21, Lev 15:11, Deut 21:1–9) however each of these regulations applies only to priests exercising their priestly duties. The “tradition of the elders” to which the Pharisees and legal experts are referring is the oral law that had been codified in written form some two hundred years earlier in the Mishnah. The oral law created safe behavioral margins around the written law by providing clarity and more robust instruction. If one obeyed the oral law reasonably well, they could be certain that they obeyed the written law completely.⁶ In all fairness to the Pharisees, they taught that the oral law had come from God through Moses in exactly the same way as the written law, such that it was equally, or nearly, as important as the written law of Moses.⁷ Jesus, however, seemed to disagree.

It is hard to believe that Jesus was prejudiced against handwashing, or cleanliness in general. What he certainly takes exception to is the idea that the practice of any societal law, or custom, could be viewed as a way of measuring ones standing before God. Even something as universally celebrated as cleanliness and good hygiene cannot determine one’s belonging in the community of faith. Perhaps cleanliness is not next to godliness after all.

It is human nature to surround ourselves with others who are most like ourselves. We feel most comfortable with what is familiar and reinforces our well-worn patterns of thought and behavior, even when these patterns are not in our own best interest. From a psychological and physiological perspective, we now know that our brain likes to use the well-established synaptic connections rather

⁵ The ritual and spiritual cleanliness that permeates the Hebrew Scriptures is fairly understood as an escalation and protection of the basic societal hygiene standards. One does not wash their clothes in preparation for God’s arrival (Exod 19:10–11), for example, unless there is some concept that general cleanliness is an honorable thing.

⁶ Interestingly enough, even in the Mishnah the references to washing hands, or washing in general, before eating only appear in the form of exceptions to what appears to be a presumed rule. Instructions to wash before meals never appear in the positive. For example, one of the four privileges granted to warriors in camp is that they are exempt from having to wash their hands before eating (Eruvin 1:10).

⁷ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 379.

than investing the energy to form the new neurological pathways associated with novel ideas or behavior. Changing our ways of thinking and behaving literally requires changing the way our brain is wired, a process called neuroplasticity.⁸ Unless our bodies are really convinced that the change is necessary, the brain will always steer us toward those experiences that use the wiring that has already been established. While this may be considered good stewardship of the synaptic connections your body has already invested in, in practice it means we subconsciously insulate ourselves from anything, or anyone, that might cause us to grow. People who share our own cultural experiences and norms reinforce our established way of being, something our brains very much appreciate. Why do men and women time and time again gravitate toward the same unhealthy relationships that mirror those they had with their unhealthy parents? Because those are the well-worn neurological pathways our brains are invested in. We gravitate toward people who share our cultural experiences and norms. Part of our humanity is that psychologically, and physiologically, our brains want us to join homogeneous units so that they can avoid the hard work of rewiring themselves.

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Human beings, be they first-century Pharisees or twenty-first-century Christians, will create systems of social rules and behaviors that we can use to filter out ideas and people that might cause us our brains to grow.

Current neuroscience serves to reinforce the insights of Martin Luther in his dispute with Erasmus regarding the nature of the human will. Luther argues that the idea of a truly free will is an illusion. In reality, our will is only free enough to serve itself. We are not free to love God or neighbor, only God's grace can allow this. The illusion of a free will, however, allows us to love and serve our sinful selves. In our humanity, we feel free to make what seem to be free choices, but our brain is constantly steering us toward serving what is known, comfortable, and already established in our neuropathways. Or flesh is free to serve itself, but the results will always be sin. That is, unless we are freed by the working of the Holy Spirit to love God and neighbor.⁹

So it is also with congregations. My congregation is inevitably made up of people who are comfortable in the cloistered reality of our homogeneous unit, which supports and enables the behaviors and beliefs that allow us to avoid growing into the reality of Christ's gospel. We feel like we are free to welcome everyone. We may even sing the hymn "All Are Welcome" with great regularity, but unless

⁸ Daniel J. Siegel, *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation* (New York: Bantam, 2010) 38–44, 84–86, 145–60.

⁹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 33, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 214, 217–19.

the Holy Spirit is binding us to itself, we are not free. We, like the Pharisees, will inevitably create barriers that insulate and protect our little homogeneous family. We can trust that it is in our nature to do this. It is human nature. What has the ability to set us apart from the Pharisees and the experts of the law is that because of the Holy Spirit we are able to be self-critical and proactively look for the hidden obstructions we have created.

Jesus does not simply reject the Pharisees appeal to tradition, he points to the incongruity in their claim that tradition honors their elders.¹⁰ Jesus shines a spotlight on hypocrisy, making it clear that “tradition” is nothing more than a tool wielded to insulate and protect their own comfort. Honoring parents is hard, time-consuming, expensive work. There are no shortcuts when it comes to caring for an elder whose health is waning. There is no expedient way of listening to the stories our seniors need to tell. Wouldn’t it be better for the kingdom of God to invest that time and energy in the work of the temple, in teaching the Torah, in fighting the advancement of zealots and false teachers who might upset the delicate balance of the world?

In the same way that Jesus has rejected using tradition as a means of clearing the uncomfortable chaff away from our worshiping communities, so also he rejects religious expedience as a justification for narrowing our welcome to those who might take our energies away from those we “really” care about.

While the law of Moses expects that parents, elders, will be honored, it sure would be easier to grow a church if we didn’t need to visit our elderly, sing those ancient hymns, or listen to the stories about how the church used to do things. In the same way, it would be nice to have a few more young families in church. It would be even better if those young families learned to wear their Sunday best, better yet if they would come every Sunday like I did with my kids, and it seems awfully disrespectful to bring video into the worship service. It is uncomfortable to create a worshiping community that really welcomes and honors everyone. Jesus rejects using anything other than the gospel as a means of creating boundaries for who constitutes the people of God. Even good, important things like personal hygiene have no role shaping who belongs in the body of Christ.

What has my congregation added to the gospel to keep ourselves protected from change. How is it that we ensure that we are surrounded by others who keep us comfortable? In our humanity, our inward bound will ensures that our natural tendency is to surround ourselves with people and practices that affirm our established behaviors and beliefs. What signals are we sending that make it clear to outsiders who belongs and who doesn’t?

Do we use subtle political jokes and commentary to filter the conservatives out of our congregations? Do we lean on our Scandinavian heritage, causing the uninitiated to feel out of place? Is our liturgy inviting and freeing, or is it a ridged formality? Are we fostering background noise in worship that makes it hard for elders to hear? Are children really welcome? Have we abandoned meaningful

¹⁰Matt 15:2–6; Jesus sees right through his accusers’ pious appeal to honor elders through tradition.

ritual for expediency? What does it really say to Spanish speakers when we murder their language and rhythms trying to prove our multiculturalism? Do we celebrate acceptance of our far-away neighbors in order to push away the neighbors next door?

When, as a young man, I imagined being a pastor, I imagined serving in a world where churches could not only survive but thrive as insulated homogeneous units. There were enough Christians of Northern European descent to fill dozens of Lutheran silos, even in Eastern Washington and Idaho. But now the demographic times they are a-changing. As the silent generation and baby boomers age, the demographic groups that traditionally make up Lutheran congregations are beginning to experience contraction. There really aren't as many of us as there used to be, and our birth rates are not high enough to replace ourselves. Even if all of our children ended up becoming faithful Lutherans, our congregations would continue to shrink.¹¹ There is no path to insulated, comfortable pastoral ministry left. If I try to build a congregation with only people who reinforce and support my established behaviors and beliefs, I simply won't have a congregation large enough to survive.

The way forward is not comfortable, it is not what I imagined it would be, and it is not what I was trained for. But, it is good. As a pastor, I am forced to help the leaders of my congregation thrive in the midst of discomfort. If we are to be the church, we must actively seek out, and dismantle, those places where we use tradition, or religious expediency, to isolate ourselves from the discomfort we need. Ultimately, Christ's desire is that our hearts be transformed so that what comes out of our lives, including our words, will build up the kingdom of God. Anyone who starts going to the gym regularly knows that change is uncomfortable, and neuroscience tells us that the same will be true for all behaviors. Our lives will either be conformed to the ways of the world or transformed by the renewing of the mind into lives that are holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1–2). Science tells us the same thing that the Holy Spirit told Paul. The renewing of the mind, through the Holy Spirit, is intimately connected with living, worshiping, and serving in the diversity of the body of Christ (Romans 12).¹²

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In our congregation, we have been working to foster discomfort. Working to make space for others who will allow us to grow in Christ. There is no way to make

¹¹ Hawley, *Demography, Culture*, 89–96, 172–74.

¹² In Romans 12, Paul invites us to present our bodies to God by doing what is “good, acceptable, and perfect.” The rest of chapter 12 provides instructions on how to discern what is within the will of God, and key within this is living within the diversity of Christ's body, the church.

everyone comfortable, so why not embrace making everyone uncomfortable for the sake of gospel. Tradition has its place but not as means to maintain homogeneity or comfort. Learning to disagree well has become a cultural emphasis. We value understanding over agreement and trust that faithful followers of Jesus who have the same gospel desires can come to very different conclusions about how we bring those gospel realities to fruition. At times, we juxtapose time-honored worship patterns with current innovations. Children are allowed to be themselves, while we strive to honor our elders. We have a long way to go, but already our little church has changed for the better, and I have grown as a pastor and disciple of Christ. I am not the same and that is a good thing.

As I look back at that room full of pastors quickly approaching retirement, I think I am seeing with new eyes the thing that I admire most among them. Scattered throughout that room were men and women who have grown to embrace the discomfort of the change swirling around them, to thrive among those most unlike themselves. Oh, how nervous the church was as many of these change-oriented young men and women were ordained. These children of the '50s and '60s were the very embodiment of celebrating the past while longing for the new. As the tidal wave of retirements approaches, we will not only be losing warm bodies to fill our pulpits, we will be losing wise guides who, in many ways, have already ventured where young pastors like myself are scared to go. ☩

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