

Based on Luke 4:6-9. Jesus Preaches Good News.

Back in the mid-1990s, when I was working for the national church as a recent college graduate, I shared the same anti-institutional religion sentiment that is so prevalent among so many of us today.

To me, the church was blatantly racist and sexist and emphatically homophobic. On the one hand, I did not want any part of it. On the other hand, really decent church people doing campus ministry at Marshall University across the state in Huntington and social justice ministry through the national church offices in Louisville, Kentucky, kept opening doors for me to try make a difference in this institutional religion. For some reason that I can only name the call of God, I kept walking through those doors.

One day, back then, as I was moaning and griping with other young adults about how awful the church was, even as we were given amazing opportunities within it, one of my colleagues said to us lovingly, *we have have to forgive the church for being the church and help it become the kingdom of God.*

This colleague was a much more mature African-American woman pastor who grew up in the Jim Crow south, so when she said what she said - about forgiving the church and helping it become the realm of God - I took it to heart. These were words of wisdom, to ponder carefully and prayerfully.

Jesus must have had similar words of wisdom shared with him in the aftermath of the sermon to his home synagogue that follows our Lesson for today. At first, the congregation is thrilled by the home-grown hero come back to show them proud. Jesus stands tall in their pulpit, he speaks clearly so all can hear, he quotes Scripture, and he waxes eloquent.

What a nice young man, they must whisper among themselves.

Let's keep opening doors for him!

Then Jesus gently but firmly calls the congregation to the carpet for their closed-mindedness, for their insularity, for their lack of a widening welcome. He quotes even more Scripture about God's love for the outcast and solidarity with the ones on the margins. He points out their blindspots, he tips over their sacred cows, and they do not like it. They go so far as to try to hurl him off a cliff!

And then I like to imagine someone says to him: we have to forgive the church for being the church and help it become the kingdom of God.

So Jesus keeps going. The call of God compels him to keep preaching and teaching and healing. Jesus keeps holding up a vision of what the realm of God really looks like to anyone who will listen. In that vision, the ones who feel most outcast by the church find instead the realm of God holds them emphatically at the center. Tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners of all kinds feast at the table of grace. A new community is born. It IS the

church! Not abandoned to the worst it can do to the world, but forgiven and loved into the very realm of God it claims to proclaim.

This is what my colleague was inviting us to do, as well. And it turns out, in many ways, she was right. Now, twenty-five years later, because we kept going, the church - or at least our own small Presbyterian part of it, has made great strides toward what I - and I think, we, here at SPC - claim to be the realm of God.

For example, in the opening ceremony of last week's General Assembly, according to the Presbyterian News Service, *a transgender member of First Presbyterian Church in Salt Lake City spoke movingly and lovingly about his story and the acceptance and love he's experienced at the church. At 12, he came out as transgender. "The same kids I had been friends with in Sunday school are still my friends now," he said. "The same old ladies who would ask me questions about school and give me candy and cake at church parties still do that. When I changed my name and pronouns, our church didn't miss a beat,* he said.

Can you imagine? A trans kid whose church places HIM at the center! (Of course you can. We did it right here at SPC just four weeks ago.)

Standing on the shoulders of millions who have kept the faith through literally millennia of exclusion, not only was this trans youth granted a prominent place to speak his truth at the Assembly last week, but *commissioners and advisory delegates gave him an extended standing ovation.*

A motion to add Transgender Day of Awareness to all publications of the denominational calendar was passed on the consent agenda. A motion to add gender identity and sexual orientation to the list of non-discrimination in full participation and representation in the life of the church passed nearly unanimously. A motion to require all those seeking ordination as Deacon, Elder, and Minister of Word and Sacrament to be examined on their commitment to this non-discrimination policy passed by a 3 - 1 margin.

None of this would have happened in the mid-1990s when I was a moaning and griping anti-institutionalist. None of this would have happened without faith-filled people, who had far more right than I to give up on the institutional church, instead forgiving it and helping it inch closer to the realm of God.

Today, the challenge young people bring to the church is around our complicity with climate change and the global capitalism that fuels it. \$300 million dollars of our denomination's pension fund is invested in fossil fuels, with no plan in place to wean ourselves off. Among the many Young Adult Advisory Delegates pleading for categorical divestment from fossil fuels, Em Rau, from Huntington, WV, said:

"I have watched the coal industry ravish my state ... literally pulling the mountains apart to ending any chance for generational wealth for the people, and I urge you, I'm begging you, begging you, commissioners, to listen to the [young people]. We don't have a future if there is no planet, and if we are the future, can you listen to us in the present, please?"

Her pleas were heard by many, and at first agreed with by 2 - 1 majority. The Assembly did vote overwhelmingly to divest categorically from fossil fuels.

Later, however, the Assembly also heard the pleas of indigenous communities in southern Louisiana for the denomination to continue engaging the fossil fuel company ConocoPhillips on their behalf. This engagement has begun to correct decades of harm done to indigenous communities by the fossil fuel industry and is proving promising for the years to come. We cannot engage ConocoPhillips if we are not active shareholders in their work.

And so the Assembly moved toward a compromise, directing our investing agencies *to immediately identify the top ten fossil fuel companies that derive the majority of their profits from the exploration, development, and production of fossil fuels and with which there will be no promising engagement, and immediately divest from those companies.*

Throughout the debate on divestment, the Assembly was reminded, as was I, that much of the work to address climate change really does need to happen at the state level. Which brings us right back where we left off last Sunday with Jacob Hannah and Brandon Dennison and the Coalfield Development Corporation. They, along with Dan Conant from Solar Holler addressed our youth between services and shared their own spirit-led approach to climate justice work with a contextual approach that affirms the heritage of our state. As you might imagine, our youth were enthralled.

We have to forgive the church for being the church, my mentor says, and help it become the realm of God. We have to forgive our state for its delay in transitioning away from coal, Jacob and Dan and Brandon say, and help it become the clean energy capital of the world.

Our job now is to take our kids to Coalfield and link up with Em in Huntington along the way and do our part for the NEXT twenty-five years of faithful preaching and teaching and healing toward the realm of God in our midst. With our youth, with Em Rau, with Jacob and Dan and Brandon, and yes even Jesus inspiring us along the way, I am choosing to believe we have more reason than ever to live into hope.