

REBUILDING THE CHURCH
Randall Tremba
May 8, 2016
Seventh Sunday in Eastertide
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

* * *

John 17:20-26

Jesus prayed and as he prayed for his disciples he said: "As you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us. May they be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me so the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

* * *

Once upon a time in the 13th century, a young Italian man named Francis was out of sorts. He had been wounded in battle, put in prison, and bailed out by his wealthy, merchant father. Francis went home a pathetic shadow of his former swash buckling self.

And then one day, a year or so later, Francis wandered into a dilapidated chapel in San Damiano outside his hometown of Assisi. As he sat lost and alone he heard a voice, *Francis, rebuild my church.*

Francis took it to be the voice of Jesus and immediately sold all his possessions, renounced his life of ease, and undertook the repair of the chapel. Francis completed his mission with the help of companions only to realize he had misinterpreted Jesus.

That happens—a lot.

As it turns out, Jesus didn't mean for him to rebuild the chapel, but rather to rebuild the *church*, the people baptized in Christ's name, a people who had lost their way entangled in religious dogma, empty rituals, and vain superstitions. And so St. Francis devoted the rest of his life proclaiming and embodying the simple gospel of Jesus: *Love one another.*

Francis would love and embrace the poor, the lepers and even Muslims. He would embrace the oneness of creation—trees, animals, rivers, and the stars of heaven—all one family—the sun as brother, the moon as sister and earth as mother. We are all one. All that *is* is holy.

Forty-two years ago on a cold, snowy December day I wandered into this church just for a quick look as I passed through town. I saw a worn and tattered church, faded blue carpet, peeling blue paint, and a black threadbare sofa behind an imposing dark brown pulpit.

I didn't hear the voice of Jesus. I felt only an urge to leave and never return. At that time my own life was in ruins and that was work enough for me.

But much to my surprise, I did return the following April as a Sunday-to-Sunday patch while this church sought a new minister. Little did I know that new minister would be me. In July of 1976, I was installed as pastor for this church.

I had no plan to rebuild this or any other church. At the time I was just trying to get by. And as I did, I began to learn a new way of being Christian, which included unlearning some old ways.

I didn't know any better so I openly shared all that I was learning, only to discover a congregation with an open mind and open heart. We learned and evolved together.

I learned that the Bible could be taken seriously without being taken literally. And that was liberating for all of us.

I learned that Jesus was indeed the way, the truth and the life. But when the dots are connected in the Gospel in which the voice of Jesus says: *I am the way, the truth and the life* (John 14), it turns out that Jesus is speaking as a symbol of love.

So I learned that *love is the way, the truth and life*, not Jesus per se and not Christianity. I learned that truth and wisdom can be found everywhere and in every religious and spiritual tradition, if you only dig deep enough to reach the common aquifer that feeds all wells.

And so I proclaimed that truth over and over, out loud and in print every chance I got. I put it into an essay entitled, "Question Authority," which was published last summer in the Good News Paper.

A certain minister happened to read that essay and filed numerous heresy charges against me in the Presbytery. In essence, he claimed that I had repudiated Christianity and slandered Jesus. Over a three-month period last fall my accuser and I had to meet with a highly confidential Investigative Committee, *a kind of grand jury*, to determine if the charges were valid. It didn't take the committee long to dismiss the charges as "without merit."

Actually, that was a bit of a let down since I had come to think that a full blown, Spanish Inquisition style trial would be a fitting capstone to my ministry. But, alas, I was let off the hook and allowed to go on preaching. So here I stand.

The charges were brought against me, but I took them to be charges against you as well for encouraging me so much. So, if I was going up in flames at the stake, I was taking you along. After all, we have been together in evolving these liberating and transformative insights and convictions of our faith.

And that's what happens when a congregation keeps an open mind and open heart to the promptings of the Spirit. As we sang last Sunday: *Spirit, open my heart to the joy and pain of living. As you love, may I love.*

Spirit, open my heart.

That openness led us to welcoming and affirming our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters when many churches refused. It led us to blessing same sex marriages in this sanctuary when many refused. It led us to publicly declare our welcome of Syrian refugees when many refused. It led us to affirm the findings of science and celebrate evolution, which many churches reject. And it led us to be designated by the Congregational Assessment Tool as an off-the-chart progressive, transformative church.

To be a transformative church is not a status symbol. It is an invitation and a challenge to keep on, to stay open to the Spirit.

Together we are rebuilding the church in the spirit of St. Francis by returning to the simple gospel of Jesus: *Love one another. Love God. Love the other. Love the world and all that is in it.*

Ultimately community is a gift. But like any gift, it must be received gratefully, cultivated faithfully and cherished steadfastly. The work never ends even though there are moments when we can lean back and enjoy what the Blessed One has given us. We take a deep breath, smile and say: *To God, all praise and glory.*