

“Future Church: Grateful Exploration”

Matthew 22: Select Phrases, Numbers 13:1-12, 13:27 & 32-33, 14:1-4, & Mark 2:22

Pastor James York

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Prayer for Understanding Everpresent God we thank you for the Bible, pages filled with a holy message and sealed with a kiss from heaven, the story of your relentless love of everyone. Calm our restless hearts and minds. Help us experience the abundant life through your love letter to us. Amen

I am grateful for you.

Pastor Angela Denker wrote: “There is a version of ingratitude that affects even those who claim to be anti-consumerist, especially within the church. Ingratitude hurts all of us. I am talking about that notion to focus on “the ones who got away.” The ones who didn’t come. The non-RSVP-ers, which can be a large group if you have ever hosted an event, a wedding, or a 6-year-old birthday party.”

“Gratitude fills us with life and passion. Gratitude is more complicated than just “giving thanks” or making lists. The life-changing gratitude we are all hungry for entails a new way of seeing, a new way of remembering, and a new way of forgetting.”

Angela continues: “This is my ode, my thanksgiving, my gratitude to the ones who were there. Every Sunday leading worship is like throwing a birthday party and you are not sure if anyone will come. Two months ago, I returned to preach at Luther Seminary where I graduated in 2013. Luther Seminary had long been the largest Lutheran seminary, but numbers have dwindled. Life changes; the world changes. Still, sometimes I have a hard time with change. I’d want to walk back into seminary and have everything be like it once was, when I was 24 years old, engaged to be married, and generally without much of a care in the world. I’d want to see the old friends I’d listen to music on the boombox with in the basement at “God’s Gym,” or walk down to the nearby school where we played pick-up basketball. I’d want to walk to the bookstore, which no longer exists, or pray in the secondary chapel, which is also now closed. Maybe I used the seminary as sort of a way to manage my grief about growing up, about the changing world and the changing church, and ultimately, the changing me. I have memories of chapel. Students strewn across three sides of the chapel pews, with the far-right side reserved for faculty members. When I stood up to preach two months ago, the pews were mostly empty. The faculty section was empty. A few professors were seated amongst the students present, and a few members from outside the community, one a beloved pastor who had driven in from the suburbs to say hi to me. I was struck again by sort of that empty sense of memory forever changed. What had become of the faculty? Some had retired, some left in disagreement, some were still there but just not at chapel that day. Some taught primarily distance students now, admittedly a much more practical way to manage seminary education. Who knows, really. It has been a number of years now. Time passes. Things change. This writing though, it isn’t about them; the ones who got away or went away. I’m part of a new group. The ones who stay. The ones who were there. And I have a new appreciation for this historically under-appreciated group. THANK YOU. Thank you to the ones who just keep showing up. Week after week. Those who say, OK, I’ll serve on that committee. I’ll decorate. I’ll help with the meal. I’ll clean up. Thank you to the ones who were there. The ones we have too often ignored in a quest for more numbers, more eyeballs, more money, more consistency, more security.” Angela continues: “I think it kind of smacks of this economic pressure for more more more more more. An engine that never has enough fuel. A beast that is never satisfied. So much for gratitude. This discontentment can seep into our individual lives as well. You find yourself obsessing about the ones who weren’t there. The rejections. The no-shows. The no-replies. The ghosting. The choices you didn’t make. The paths you didn’t take. The unanswered prayers. And all the while, people like the folks sitting with me in chapel two months ago are standing there in front of you, jumping up and down. “We are here!” they are yelling. “We are right here!” Sometimes, I am in a pit, I am stuck in bitterness. Unable to see the people who are here because of memories of legions of the ones who are not here haunting me. So this new year. I am going to start instead by counting. Purposefully. Slowly. The ones who are here. Again and again. And as I do so, in their faces - in your faces - I see God.” *An insight by Pastor Angela.*

I am grateful for you. Two weeks ago we explored how gratitude is a dependable guide through change. Gratitude enables us to be thankful for the passing season and be grateful for the opportunity to journey into a new season.

In the midst of change from slavery to the Promised Land, the Israelites were given direction for only the next few steps on the journey, a half day at most, a cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. The Israelites were given only enough resources for one day, except on the eve of the sabbath when 2 days of resources could be gathered. If they

tried to gather more than one or two days of food then the food spoiled. No one knows what the future church will look like. We are to be observant and take steps into the future.

Leonard Sweet has observed that for the last 500 years, ministry has focused on words. The words of sermons, sometimes with 3 points. The words of liturgy. The words of Christian curriculum. The words of theology and apologetics. It has been a glorious and wonderful season. I am grateful for the season. In the United States, this season peaked in the 1950s and 1960s. Church membership, budgets, and resources have been accelerating in the speed of decline since 1970. Trying to maintain the past with less, in a culture that increasingly is communicating in different ways is exhausting. Some believe that the overabundance of the 1950s and 1960s gave rise to the church paying staff to do ministry of the church that we are all called to share. An invitation of the future church might be an invitation for everyone to share ministry, everyone helping each other on the journey as equals.

Leonard believes we are being called as a church to connect each individual's story to the author of our story, God, through image, metaphor and song, to shift from a few sharing a sermon, or teaching, to everyone actively participating through conversation, images, art and song. The Sessions of New Life and North are exploring how to create a worship experience featuring conversation, a safe place for questions, exploration, a place to share stories, to eat together, play together, serve together and make music together. We are exploring a joint worship experience. Seventeen years ago, we launched the Christ Connection contemporary service. A contemporary service must change for it to remain contemporary. The Sessions are exploring having one Sunday morning traditional service and a new worship experience on Sunday evenings. We are once reformed, always reforming.

In 2021, for the first time less than half of the adults in the United States belonged to a church, synagogue, or mosque. Only 29 percent of the Twin Cities population attends a Christian church. Of the minority who do attend church, 57% of them are tired of the usual type of church experience. While you might think that some groups of Christians are more likely than others to feel this way, data show no significant difference across denomination, generation, or faith segment. The language of the church is not known by most people. Most people still are seeking experiences of God. More and more people are connecting with God outside the church. We have a wonderful opportunity to unite with people outside the church and learn, grow, and journey together. Leonard believes if we are going to be the church of the future, we need to learn the language of people today. The language of images, metaphor, and song. Fortunately, this is the way Jesus interacted with people when he was on earth in human flesh. Jesus taught with images such as the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, yeast, a treasure hidden in a field, a found coin. Most of the people who were healed by Jesus had a conversation with Jesus. The disciples felt safe asking Jesus questions. **Matthew 22:Select Phrases NLT "Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"** Jesus answered: **Show me the coin used for the tax." When they handed Jesus a Roman coin, Jesus asked, "Whose picture and title are stamped on it?" "Caesar's," they replied. "Well, then," Jesus said, "give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God."** And what belongs to God? We belong to God. God is the author of our story. We are part of the story of God creating, loving, redeeming, and resurrecting humanity. In our quest for great sermons, liturgy, and curriculum have we got lost in the details, forgetting the context, the story of God's redeeming love freely offered to all people? Jesus and the disciples sang together. They sang the psalms. Jesus words on the cross are from the psalms. Jesus was singing on the cross. The future church will likely sing together.

Canoeing the Mountains is a book on the future church. It explores how we are in a similar place to the Lewis and Clark expedition. The explorers all had excellent canoeing skills. No matter how hard they tried it would have been impossible to canoe over the mountains. Instead, they had to repurpose their canoes into backpacks and paddles into hiking sticks. They had to transform their canoeing skills into climbing skills. How will we repurpose our worship spaces into spaces where future generations will experience God? We have excellent word skills how will we transform our skills into conversations, storytelling, metaphors and lyrics, all communicated in the language of future generations?

Two weeks ago, we explored how change is challenging. Even good positive change, that we want to undertake is difficult. The Israelites in the midst of the change they wanted became bitter, divided, grumbled, longed for the past and blamed each other. Change is even more difficult for those of us who are still engaged with a church today, because we are changing from a season that many of us enjoyed to an unknown season that some of us are not enjoying.

Despite all their blaming, complaining, bitterness, and resistance to change the Israelites journeyed to just across the river from the Promised Land. God was trying everything to get them to change and enter the Promised Land. **Numbers 13:1-12 NLT "The Lord now said to Moses, "Send out scouts to explore the land of Canaan, the land I am giving to the Israelites."** After exploring the land the scouts reported. **Numbers 13:27 NLT "We entered**

the land you sent us to explore, and it is indeed a bountiful country—a land flowing with milk and honey.” Then selfishness blinded the Israelites. They forgot the promise God made with them, that they were being blessed so they could bless all people. They got lost in the details forgetting the big story of God’s love. How every person is lovingly created in God’s image. How God is loving to unite all people in community. Instead of moving into the land and living harmony with the inhabitants, learning from the inhabitants, sharing their experiences of God and blessing each other, exploring how each unique person is a beloved member of God’s love story, their selfishness deceived them into thinking they should conquer the people already living in the land. Fear paralyzed the Israelites. **Numbers 13:32-33 NLT “So they spread this discouraging report about the land among the Israelites: “The land we traveled through and explored will devour anyone who goes to live there. All the people we saw were huge. We even saw giants.”**

Tragically the church has similarities. We have a history of selfishness, of conquering people and murdering people outside of our group. Are we, as a church, still hesitant to bless all people? Are we restricting our blessings to certain people, who do certain things and live a certain way? Do we name call people outside of our group perceiving them as giants that block the way? Do we try to get others to think, believe, journey and worship like us? God’s promises are forever true. We are being blessed by God so the church will always be called to bless all people, to share experiences of God and journey with people who are different from us, to love all people. God loves everyone. Jesus crossed every distinction to bring people into community. Jesus commands us to love everyone.

Instead of changing, living free, in harmony with the inhabitants of the glorious Promised Land, the Israelites stubbornly refused to change, to journey into the next season. Nostalgia blinded them into a desire to go back to the old days. Instead of changing to love all people, they selfishly wanted to go back to the familiar ways of divisions, tribes and segregation. **Numbers 14:1-4 “Then the whole community began weeping aloud, and they cried all night. Their voices rose in a great chorus of protest against Moses and Aaron. “If only we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!” they complained. “Why is the Lord taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and our little ones will be carried off as plunder! Wouldn’t it be better for us to return to Egypt?” Then they plotted among themselves, “Let’s choose a new leader and go back to Egypt!”**

Humanity often gets stuck by comparisons, division, by binary thinking, by judgements. We resist change by categorizing, good, better, best, by either or thinking. Our experiences often cripple us from making good positive change. Often, we take past solutions and force them on current problems. Albert Einstein said: “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.” MIT has found that lasting good change is like a U. We go down the U by downloading past patterns. Suspending. Seeing with fresh eyes. Redirecting. Sensing. Letting go. Letting go. Letting go. This takes us to the bottom of the U which is presencing, connecting to source, experiencing God. We now journey up the U by letting come. Crystalizing. Enacting. Prototyping. Living the new with the whole. In other words let go of past solutions, empty ourselves, pause for inspiration, dream, imagine, implement, learn from failings, implement until a solution for everyone is achieved. We will be tempted to hold onto ministries and beloved ways of being church, instead of discovering the new ministries God desires for us.

Gil Rendle believes the church needs explorers to guide us into the future. Explorers who are eager to try new approaches, letting go of the fear of failure, rapidly prototyping, trying a variety of approaches, learning from each approach, causing the church to change, until a life giving approach is discovered. For us to become the church of the future we need to be more passionate about change than preserving our past. For us to become the church of the future we need to be more passionate about loving everyone than preserving our group.

When we stubbornly hold on to the old ways of being, church ministry seems like a rowboat. When we let go, change, and let God, ministry becomes like a sailboat. If we are willing to let go of control, the work, the rowing and be open we can sail on the wind of the Holy Spirit.

When the people rebuilt the temple and worshiped together in the temple again, Ezra describes the contrast between those who were still nostalgic for the past and those who were embracing the new season. **Ezra 3:12-13 NLT “Many of the older priests, Levites, and other leaders who had seen the first Temple wept aloud when they saw the new Temple’s foundation. The others, however, were shouting for joy. The joyful shouting and weeping mingled together in a loud noise that could be heard far in the distance.”** We will need to grieve and let go of past and current ways of ministry to enjoy the life of future ministries. I pray we will journey together into the next season for the church, that we will comfort those weeping over change, rejoice with those enjoying the new season and be grateful; grateful for the past season, grateful for the coming season, grateful for each other, grateful for our God who is relentless in loving us.

Jesus said: **Mark 2:22 NLT “No one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the wine would burst the wineskins, and the wine and the skins would both be lost. New wine calls for fresh wineskins.”** Amen