

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Up until this point in Matthew’s gospel, the disciples have been observers and learners. They have been following Jesus and listening to his sermons and parables, they have witnessed healings and the way Jesus changed people’s lives. Now they are being called upon to take all that they have learned and witnessed, and to do the same work themselves. They were being called upon to be the presence of Christ to those who were harassed and helpless.

“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus was motivated by the needs of the people. His goal was not to convert as many people as possible to follow him. He was not motivated by growing his movement and the number of his followers. His motivation came from compassion and a desire to heal people’s brokenness in all the ways brokenness shows up in people’s lives.

Last weekend, Claire and Tracy and I gathered with members of United Church of Christ churches from all across the state of Minnesota for the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Conference. The first keynote speaker was Kristina Lizardy-Hajbi, the director of the UCC’s Center for Analytics, Research and Data (CARD) on the topic of church vitality.¹ Vitality broadly defined is the state of being strong and active. Having the capacity for a meaningful and purposeful existence. CARD has been studying congregations and analyzing what the indicators are for a church that is vital. Kristina began by telling us what things do not indicate church vitality. The first is size. Bigger does not necessarily mean better. Of course this isn’t the narrative that we see in our culture. Portion sizes of food have gotten bigger and bigger over the years and fast food chains are famous for encouraging customers to “super size” their meals for only a few additional pennies. But when it comes to being a vital church, the research shows that bigger isn’t better, it’s just bigger.

¹ The full text of the keynote address can be found at <http://uccmn.org/uccinmn/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/MN-Conf-Annual-Meeting-Keynote-2017.pdf>

The second thing that vitality is not, is growth. In the words of Edward Abbey, “Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell.” Increasing the number of people in the pews is not necessarily an indication that a church is vital. Kristina reminded us that growth in church membership and worship attendance is effected by many factors that are completely out of our control. Many churches worry that if they are not growing, it must mean that they are not vital and this is simply not the case. Even churches with decreasing numbers can be a vital and vibrant community.

Lastly, vitality is not about numbers. Kristina emphasized that what we measure matters. Churches are often overly focused on how many people are in the pews on Sunday morning and how much money is in the bank. It is important to keep track of these things, but they shouldn’t define us as a congregation nor be the only measurement we use to determine if our church is vital.

After outlining all the things that vitality is not, Kristina offered two definitions of church vitality. The first comes from vitality researcher Linda Bobbitt who says that vitality is the strength of a congregation’s connection to these three things: God, each other, and the world. Gil Rendle, a Methodist church leader and author, says that vitality is the potential of the congregation for accomplishing the real outcome of ministry, which he defines as making disciples and changing the world.

Through it’s research, CARD determined that there are 5 indicate church vitality. While these are not all-encompassing, how congregations lived into each of these factors was found to be highly predictive of their overall vitality.

The first one is excitement about the future at the church. The mindset of the people is one that looks forward into the possibilities of the future instead of focusing on how things used to be.

The second factor is the congregations is always ready to try something new. They view experiments as learning opportunities, even the ones that go poorly.

Third is the congregation seeks out and uses the gifts of members of all ages. I'm going to simply quote Kristina here. She expounded on this factor by asking a series of questions: "What if churches didn't just seek out volunteers to fill slots on committees, but engaged the congregation in a process that helped to identify—and then deploy—their inherent and learned gifts in ways so that people could truly flourish? What if this process really extended to all ages? What would it look like to utilize the gifts of children and youth as they themselves have identified, not as adults have directed for them? What if a young person sat on the church council? How would that transform the council and the church? Using fully the gifts and contributions of all the people means that the church might actually be transformed, and is the living expression of the second vitality factor regarding openness to change."

The fourth indicator of church vitality is that the church is a place that helps people live out their faith in daily life. How are the parishioners of the church different in the world as a result of being part of their faith community? How is the church nurturing and empowering people to live lives modeled in the ways and words of Jesus?

The final factor of congregational vitality is the congregation is a positive force in the community. This feels closely connected to the previous indicator. Being a positive force means having relationships with people and organizations in the community so that the church's wellbeing is tied to the community's wellbeing and the church contributes to the wellbeing of the wider community in meaningful ways. Vital churches address both social concerns (help those in need) and work for social justice and advocacy by working change the systems that cause that need in the first place. Congregations that are vital understand that their ministry must include both charity and justice, working alongside those in need and those who are being affected by unjust systems. For example, means not only providing shelter for homeless families, but working to address the underlying issues of poverty and affordable housing.

I had planned on this sermon being a neat and tidy look at church mission and the ways in which we are called to go out into the world to be the hands and feet of

Jesus just as the 12 apostles were sent out in our text from Matthew. I was going to imagine some of the ways in which we might be called to be a positive force for the Brainerd Lakes area. And I am sure we will continue to have these conversations. But I had been pondering this sermon topic for a few days when the news of the not guilty verdict for Jeronimo Yanez, the police officer who shot and killed Philando Castile in St. Paul last year in the presence of his girlfriend and her four year old daughter. In some ways Minneapolis and St. Paul feel really far away and even irrelevant to our local Brainerd community. We don't experience the same level of gun violence or crime. Racism is not as obvious here to those of us who are white, in large part because we live in an area that is 95% white and only 1% black versus Saint Paul that is 53% white and 15% black. And yet regardless of how many people of color live in the Brainerd area, we are all impacted by white privilege and systemic white supremacy. I was challenged by someone on my Facebook page after I made a comment about the not guilty verdict that I have never had to be in the shoes of a police officer nor was I one the jury of the case. Both of these things are true of course. And yet we live in a country in which black folks are 2.5 times more likely to be shot and killed by the police than their white counterparts.² Being unarmed doesn't seem to make much difference. In fact unarmed black Americans are five times as likely as unarmed white Americans to be shot and killed by a police officer.

This week also marked the two year anniversary of the shooting of the Charleston 9. When a white supremacist walked into Mother Emanuel AME church and after spending over an hour with them in Bible study, killed nine people with black skin. As we think about the ways we as a congregation respond to human need, I pray that we will look at the ways in which we can contribute to the dismantling of systemic racism and white supremacy. That we might have the courage to speak up every time we hear a racist comment. That we might educate ourselves on the topic of white privilege so we can recognize and change the ways it negatively impacts our siblings

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2016/07/11/arent-more-white-people-than-black-people-killed-by-police-yes-but-no/>

with black and brown skin. This call is for all of us whom society identifies as white. May we listen with open ears and open hearts to the stories and experiences of our black and brown siblings. May we be moved with compassion by the continued harm that is caused by the construct of whiteness. May we declare and live into the statement that black lives matter, because the dominant culture of this country continues to act in ways that say black lives don't matter. By insisting on the intrinsic worth of all human beings, Jesus models for us how God loves justly, and how we as his disciples can love publicly in a world of violent inequality.

May it be so. Amen.