

TWO CHURCHES WITH ONE MISSION

Let me hasten to explain that this sermon title reflects a hope – a dream – I have. It does not reflect an already present reality. There is evidence and there are signs that *The New Church* and Community Church, Congregational are cooperating more and more and supporting each other more gracefully all the time. But there is still animosity in some quarters, and certainly no formal votes have been taken by either congregation to express a greater unity than the one we are stumbling into as we go.

But you see, I have been Pastor of *The New Church* for four and a half years. This was not my idea, even though I was in on the ground floor, so to speak. Barbara Anderson, years ago Head Deacon here in this church, was the person who first received the concept, and then she initiated and invited people to come be part of this online church – an idea even more outlandish back then than it is today.

In any case, I now have a great deal of loyalty toward *The New Church*. Had you suggested that I abandon TNC to come be your Pastor here, that would have been an instant deal-breaker. But no one whispered such a notion at the time. When Countryside Community Church in Omaha, Nebraska, called me to be a full-time Pastor there, they were delighted to get TNC in the bargain. They even rewired their chapel at their own expense so that *The New Church* could stream its services from the chapel when I was not preaching in their main sanctuary.

So today *The New Church* still worships online, as always. Only now we hear a beautiful choir and feel the setting of this lovely sanctuary, and I no longer preach from the pulpit that my son, Brennan, built for me or tilt my head because of the slanting ceiling in my third-floor library in Port Townsend, where we were trying to learn about streaming and insufficient bandwidth and endless other issues that we did not at first think had anything to do with Christianity.

And so today what I preach to you I preach to them, and vice versa. More and more I hope that our association will become a seamless partnership. Some of it already has. I hope, for instance, that all of you who can possibly arrange it will come to the Retreat at the end of this month. It is an annual TNC Retreat. TNC makes all the arrangements, takes all the financial risks, stands ready to

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supplement the cost for anyone who requests it – and they will do that just as quickly and happily for any of you as they will for any of their own members.

A few people are still grumbling that I should not be allowed to Pastor two churches. That's okay; a little grumbling is good for the soul. If you asked me privately and quietly, I would probably tell you that at my age I shouldn't even be trying to Pastor one church, never mind two. On the other hand, is it not amusing that anyone would complain because in calling me, you got TNC in the bargain?

More and more of you are realizing that this is a better deal than you at first imagined. We do of course stream our services online for TNC members, but it is the nature of streaming than anyone who wants to can tune in. More and more of you are finding this helpful and convenient when you are traveling or are sick, or when you have guests that make you ashamed to be Christians and it is more convenient to view the service at a later time. Joey Moschetti tells me that by the end of a normal week, we have more than ninety views – that is, people who have tuned in to view our online service either live or later. Joey Moschetti, if you don't know her yet, has been my editor for many years. She is the one who keeps TNC communications flowing and the bulletins and announcements and archives always current. Without her, TNC flat-out would not have been possible. One of the top joys of my life is the way that Joey and Catherine Merola have teamed up for the tasks that concern both congregations. Much of the seamlessness that already exists is because of them and the way they work together.

So who is paying for all the streaming equipment? Well, you have been remodeling Hougan Hall, which means there will be some place to put the equipment. Thank you, thank you. But the equipment itself is all being purchased by *The New Church*. We just purchased new cameras for over \$13,000. They are designed to be more versatile and less visible than the one camera we have at present. But installing them, for the most part, has fallen onto your plate. We are working together in many ways already.

Have you found any other benefits because TNC has come into your picture? That is, because you called me to be your Pastor and got TNC in the bargain? We lost about ten members because you called me. Most of them knew before I even arrived that they would

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not be able to stand me. I have a certain amount of regret whenever that happens. But my New England Mentor, Frank Weiskel, would sometimes comment: “The Holy Spirit knows what we sometimes forget – that elimination is as necessary to the health of the body as ingestion.” If our model for the Christian church is the Dead Sea, we will end up as stale and brackish as *it* is.

So we have lost ten members and gained twenty-two so far – wonderful new members with enthusiasm and eagerness, with a willingness to learn, with a desire to be faithful to Jesus. If anyone wants to grumble about that, it’s fine with me.

Or maybe a few of you are just annoyed because I might be getting paid too much. I suspect some people would think I was being paid too much regardless of how much it was or how many churches were involved. Even so, you don’t pay me as much as the Conference Guidelines suggest. And that is not a complaint at all. I am getting along just fine, and I have been a Pastor long enough not to expect you to pay me what the average member of this church makes. But have you noticed what has happened to *your* budget since TNC came into your picture along with me?

Some of it is you coming awake and alive again to your purpose and mission under Christ. I am very grateful for that. And matching funds, after all, mean nothing if there is nothing to match. But there was a significant influx to your budget as soon as you called me, and long before the 84-Day Campaign was designed. And who put up the money for those matching funds? Is it possible that some of you do not realize that it was coming from TNC members who want our two churches to be strong and effective together? They could have given it all to *The New Church*, but they gave it to Community Church, Congregational instead. And anybody on your Church Council or Board of Trustees can tell you that none of it had any strings attached – none whatsoever. None of it had any contingencies. You – Community Church, Congregational – have had total say about how any of this new money has been or will be spent. Is that blind faith? Maybe somebody has figured out that since we have “thrown in together,” if CCC is not strong, TNC cannot be strong – and vice versa. I hope it doesn’t take very long for the rest of us to figure that out.

Anyway, if you prefer grumbling to gratitude, it’s still a free country. I keep trying to remind myself that everyone has a right to their own opinion, no matter how weird or thoughtless it might seem

to me. Even so, you are likely to receive a much better response by sharing it with others than you will by trying to convince me that I have been thoughtless, prayerless, careless, or unfaithful in this matter.

But enough of that. And hopefully this will be the last time I will try to bring any of this to your attention. So what do I really want to talk about? Most of us would agree that friendship is one of the greatest blessings we have in this realm. Friendships based on a mutual love and admiration and gratitude for Jesus are one of the brightest lights of my life. Yes, I have lost some relationships because of Jesus. However painful, it is no surprise; Jesus warned us that this will happen if we are faithful to Him. But the friendships that have come and grown and lasted far outweigh the trauma and sorrow of those I have lost. Is that not true for you as well?

Moreover, I suspect that nearly all of us have deep friendships beyond the borders of whatever church we belong to at any given time. Isn't that amazing and wonderful? But it raises a question that has long troubled me: Why are there not more *congregations* that share a deep bond of friendship with each other? By the very nature of Christian love, by the teachings and commandments we have from Jesus, and because of the trials and turmoil of this world we live in, would we not expect to see far more churches with bonds of Christian love and mutual support and a sense of shared mission together?

To be sure, there are hints of such things here and there. But they are rare beyond very superficial levels. They are few and far between. Just to tip my hat to the opposition: I was Pastor of our Mercer Island church in the state of Washington for fifteen years. This church was founded with the help and blessing of the First Congregational Church of Bellevue. Bellevue is just across the bridge from Mercer Island, on the mainland. All of the members of First Congregational Church who lived on Mercer Island were invited to leave First Congregational Church and become the nucleus of this "new church start" on Mercer Island. Not all of them were willing to break old ties, but a strong contingent of families did become the core of this new church. They were still dear friends, and they were the strongest contingent of the members of the Mercer Island church when I arrived as their third Pastor, some years later.

But there was nothing left of any strands of friendship or mutual caring between the Bellevue church and the Mercer Island church by the time I arrived. Does that not seem strange? Would we not think – and expect – that on the Christian side of life, many congregations would have deep and meaningful bonds of friendship for and between each other? So it is interesting to me (to use the mildest word I can think of) to feel how many forces, opinions, and attitudes are at work to instill suspicion, jealousy, distrust, and animosity between TNC and CCC. If this is true for two congregations as similar in principle, in polity, and in purpose as CCC and TNC, no wonder there are so few genuine friendships between other churches “out there.”

Of course, we all know the realities. Everyone is so busy surviving; when would we have time to discover any trust or appreciation for each other? If we take time out to promote another church’s program, what will happen to our own programs? And if, around the time some bonds do start to grow, the other church changes Pastors, are we not forced back to square one? So I’m not trying to play Pollyanna here – just musing.

Today’s Scripture reading is probably one you have never heard in a worship service before. It is too full of mundane details and the names of significant people in Paul’s time that do not mean anything to most people today – unless they happen to love the story of the early church enough to get into it a lot deeper than most people do.

About one hundred miles east of Ephesus, there are three churches in a little triangle: Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. How many of you have read Paul’s letter to the Laodiceans? Paul clearly states that after the Colossian Christians have read the letter he has written to them, they are to share it with the members of the church at Laodicea, only eight miles west of them. And then they are to read the letter Paul has written to the Laodiceans. The church at Laodicea meets in the home of a woman named Nympha. There are no church buildings yet; these are all house-churches – small gatherings of Christians who meet to talk and pray and worship with each other, share a meal, sing hymns. The pagan world all around them seems huge and powerful, so they still care about each other and feel connected to each other.

Maybe it’s only Paul who feels the connections, and indeed Paul dreams and works for a unity between Christians that he believes is the true purpose of Jesus the Christ. I have no such hope in my time,

at least not in this realm. I deeply envy the fact that Paul can still hold such a hope in his time, though clearly it is one of the most unrealistic parts of his faith. But it does seem like the infant churches of Paul's world do care about each other and hunger for news about each other far more than anything we experience in church-life today. Is it because Paul has been so influential in starting all these churches? Is he the common denominator? By the third century, the turf wars and theological debates and political realities of a vast Christian establishment seem to have washed the love bonds and the relationships so far under the carpet that for the most part, we never see them again.

Nevertheless, we are reading from a letter Paul has written to Colossae, the smallest and most insignificant church Paul ever writes to. He is writing from prison – most think in Rome; I suspect in Ephesus. So why does Paul write to Colossae? The drama behind the scenes is that Paul has become friends with Onesimus, a runaway slave. Onesimus has escaped from the little village of Colossae and run away to hide in the largest city of Asia Minor: Ephesus. You are astute enough to realize that as a Roman citizen, Paul is not being detained behind bars; he is under house-arrest, awaiting trial. A Roman soldier is always on duty to watch him, but Paul is still able to teach and preach to the community of Christians at Ephesus, as long as they come to him. Onesimus is attracted to Christianity and to Paul, and he has made himself more and more useful while Paul's movements are limited by this house-arrest. Paul also has a friend back in Colossae. Not surprisingly, this friend is the head of the church at Colossae – Philemon is his name. And Philemon turns out to be the slave-owner from whom Onesimus has run away.

Paul's major reason for writing to Colossae is his hope that Philemon will free Onesimus legally and send him back to Ephesus a free man. Paul's letter to Colossae, to Philemon, and to Laodicea all have this major hope and purpose in mind. That is, behind the genuine Christian greetings and messages, Paul wants all the Christians in the area to know of his love for Philemon and for Onesimus, and he wants them all to know of his hope: that Philemon will free Onesimus. Freeing a slave is serious business, and the support of the whole Christian community – and the bonds between three Christian congregations – is something Paul is calling on and counting on for this purpose.

How and when would Paul and Philemon have become close friends? Paul's letter to Philemon reveals no casual or generic acquaintance. Clearly Philemon is a convert of Paul's, and Paul trusts this bond between them to be deep and genuine. I have to assume that Paul spent sufficient time in Colossae to have this friendship form and build, even if Paul was not focused on starting a church in Colossae at the time (though I suspect he was). And Epaphras became one of its chief members and teachers. Some scholars claim that Paul was never in Colossae, and therefore had no part in the formation of the church there. But they are paying too much attention to their knowledge of Greek and not enough time looking at the maps. How would Paul have walked from Pisidian Antioch to Ephesus on the roads of that time *without* going through Colossae? And did he stop off there for several weeks to make tents and to reprovision himself for the remaining hundred miles of his journey to Ephesus? A hundred miles was a long way in Paul's time – he did not ride a bus; he didn't even have a bicycle.

Anyway, Tychicus (a native of Asia Minor) and Onesimus are traveling from Ephesus to Colossae with at least three letters, one of which has been lost: we do not have Paul's letter to Laodicea; it was not preserved. We do know that Philemon will free Onesimus and, piecing together the fragments of the documents we do have, apparently Onesimus will become the Bishop of Ephesus in later years – which means, in effect, he becomes the Bishop of Asia Minor. He will be one of the first to realize how valuable the letters of Paul really are, perhaps because he himself was freed from slavery by means of them. He will also realize that more and more of them are being lost. So as Bishop, Onesimus makes it one of his purposes to see how many of Paul's letters can still be found and preserved. But being a Bishop is no easy task, so he looks around to see who he can entrust with such a task. He ends up sending an old and trusted friend to track down every hint they have of the various congregations which have received a letter from Paul and to ask: Do you still have a copy of one of Paul's letters? The man Onesimus sends is Philemon, his old master. And so even one personal letter from Paul makes it into our New Testament: the letter Paul wrote to Philemon himself, urging him to free Onesimus.

This letter to Colossae is a veritable “who's who” of the early church, even though it is a very short letter indeed. It reveals astounding things about the nature and the quality of the friendships

that existed among many early Christians. Certainly it was not because there was never any strain or weight put on these friendships. Barnabas and Paul had split over whether or not to bring John Mark on the second missionary journey. It's so nice to have Paul mentioning Barnabas again, and to realize that Mark is no longer on Paul's blacklist. By this time, Mark would already be busy collecting and compiling the information for what we call the Gospel of Mark.

In any case, many amazing friendships are revealed in this letter, and many of them have gone through the crucible and had to be regained by way of the mercy and forgiveness that are revealed in the presence and power of our Lord. The bonds between the early churches themselves are sometimes revealed as well. It is a dangerous time for them, and they are all in the same boat in ways that do not seem as real to most churches today. They have many of the same leaders in common, and they show more support for each other than is ever noticed by casual readers. Aristarchus is from Thessalonica, and he is a better friend to Paul than most people realize. Luke and Lydia, from Philippi, bring strong support to Paul in all the churches he goes on to serve, until Luke himself becomes Paul's best friend and traveling companion during the last five years of Paul's life (and his own).

Of course, I do not mean to soft-pedal anything. Demas is the prototype for some of the people many of us have known. He is mentioned three times in the New Testament: Here in Colossians, Paul writes, "*Greetings to you from our dear friend Luke, the doctor, and from Demas.*" He is mentioned again in the letter to Philemon. (Philemon 1:24) But in one of the letters to Timothy, Paul comments: "*Demas, being in love with this present age, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.*" (II Timothy 4:10)

Some of us suspect that despite two hundred years of cultural acceptance and approval, at least in this country, the Christian church is now moving into more dangerous times again. Fifty years ago we could pretty much assume that Christian leaders would be treated by community leaders with respect and deference. Sometimes that is still the case, but less and less often. The scorn and the animosity toward Christianity are becoming more obvious all the time. And sadly, many groups of Christians in our time do earn and deserve it.

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In any case, *The New Church* and Community Church, Congregational are sister churches in many, many ways. They do not have the same mission yet – not in any formal or clearly understood and acknowledged way. But at the present moment they are certainly moving toward just such a seamless trust and partnership. My hopes and my prayers are clearly in line with this direction and this future. I strongly urge each of you to be thoughtful and prayerful and alert to all such possibilities. Be among those who help us to move in this direction. I do not call you to fight all those who disagree. I call you to patiently and consistently and prayerfully help us to move in this direction.

Meanwhile, come to the Retreat. Get ready to write the most thoughtful Covenant you have ever written. And go on loving each other in Jesus' Name.