

“All the Trees of the Field Shall Clap Their Hands: Rediscovering a Diverse Church Ecology”

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10/27/23

One of my favorite places is the Loess Hills of Western Iowa. I spent many years as the Dean of Trinity Cathedral in Omaha, and would often spend a day off hiking with my dog in those hills. They are a stunning example of biodiversity. There are hundreds of different plant and animal species that make up a particularly beautiful prairie ecosystem. The different flowers, trees, grasses, and animals all express themselves differently, but they are deeply interdependent. None of them could fully exist and thrive in the same way without all the others.

Suzanne Simard, a name some of you may know, is a tree biologist (and has become a hero of mine in recent years). Her research has helped us understand the critical importance of diversity in a thriving ecosystem. She was also among the first to help us understand that a forest is not a random collection of independent trees, but a deeply interconnected community, which uses underground fungal networks to send messages and nutrients to one another. In any given forest, there are a number of what she calls mother trees, old growth oaks who serve as the hubs navigating the flow of information and nutrients, so that the whole forest can thrive. In her magnificent memoir, “Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest,” she writes: “Plants are attuned to one another's strengths and weaknesses, elegantly giving and taking to attain exquisite balance. There is grace in complexity, in actions cohering, in sum totals.”¹

¹ Simard, Suzanne. Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest. Page 179. Knopf, New York. 2021

And: “There is a necessary wisdom in the give-and-take of nature—its quiet agreements and search for balance. There is an extraordinary generosity.”² In any ecosystem, diversity and deep interdependence are both necessary for thriving, and adapting to changing conditions.

As a church, we don’t seem to have fully internalized that truth. When we talk about the challenges currently facing us, it often sounds like we think the goal is to preserve the monoculture of some real or imagined past. The fact is The Episcopal Church has almost always been a motley collection of small and scrappy local faith communities. And in the post-World War II population and economic boom we got really big for a minute, and have been in decline ever since then. Today, we’re about the same size as a percent of the population that we were in the 1930s. But who we were in that season has cemented in our imagination as who we are always supposed to be. Every church had full pews, every church had a full Sunday school, every church had a full-time priest who was thirty years old and had twenty-five years of experience. Some trees may have been slightly bigger than others, but they were all the same glorious species. We have been trapped for a few decades now in a nostalgia for a monoculture that may or may not have ever actually existed.

I have been a priest of this church for more than twenty years now, and in that time, I have seen us try every anxious thing we can think of to get back to that monoculture. All of them have failed. Every single one. The thing is, if there were a pathway to that, we would have found it by now. We are not likely to do better by just working harder. As our beloved Presiding Bishop reminded the House of Bishops a few months ago: Jesus is coming back, the 1950’s are not.

² *Ibid*, 3.

So what do we do? I don't have a say in what Eastern and Western Michigan are going to do, but I can tell you what I am trying to do, and what we are trying to do together in Minnesota. We are starting by posing a series of critical questions about the choice in front of us.

What would it look like to invest more time, energy, and money in seeding the future than in trying to return the past? What if we just let go of all our anxiety about decline, and just let ourselves fall in love with Jesus again, together, and see what God might do? So I want to talk with you tonight about what that looks like for us.

First, we have to let go of our anxious attempts to save the church, and make a radical return to our basic project of forming disciples of Jesus. We have tried over and over to recruit church members. We've even become ok (ish) with the word evangelism! But we often sound like the reason we want those church members is so they can help pay our bills, rather than find true freedom and healing in Jesus. What we've done less of is invite ourselves and others to apprentice their whole life to the way of Jesus. If we want others to join up with us, then we have to ask: when they look at us, when they worship with us, can they see that any of it makes any difference? We are very good at asking questions about the church, but can we learn how to ask the primary question of what God is doing first, and build the church around how we answer that?

The earliest Christians had no money, no buildings, no clergy (not in the way we do now), and no cultural influence, and they turned the world upside down. They did that because their lives had been completely transformed in a real way by encountering the risen Jesus, and they apprenticed

their whole lives to his way of love. I am very often wrong, but I believe that if we are not totally focused on helping people tether their hearts to the living God, so that we show up in the world saturated by the Spirit, looking and acting like Jesus, then no amount of planning, or money, or brilliant programming will make any difference. And if we do have that radical focus, then nothing will be able to stop it. For so many years, we have been trying to address what are fundamentally spiritual challenges with structural and programmatic solutions. So, in Minnesota, we are trying to go deep in Bible Study, get serious about daily prayer and basic spiritual practices, serving the poor and marginalized in whatever basic ways we can. Sharing our lives deeply with each other.

And then, from that rich soil of discipleship, we have to join God in cultivating a diverse church ecology. The beauty of the Loess Hills comes from the dizzying variety of ways plants and animals express themselves, but in the church, we've tried to make everything an oak tree. What if, alongside our congregations with beautiful buildings and resident clergy and choirs and all the things we think churches are supposed to have, we planted small communities that meet in homes or public spaces, congregations that are gathered around hiking in the outdoors, or that meet at the dog park, or my personal favorite fishing, or whatever?

In Minnesota, there are currently ninety-three congregations, and most people imagine that ten years from now, we will have fewer than we have now. That's perfectly logical, but the thing I don't like about the strategy of just downsizing and managing the decline is that it counts God out. The whole story of scripture is that with our God, there is nothing that is not possible. From the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, the story is that there is nothing so far gone it

cannot be saved, there is no one so lost they cannot be found, there is nothing so broken it cannot be healed, and there is nothing so dead God can't transform it into new and glorious life. What if we actually believed that about the landscape of our church?

So instead of seeing our leadership as managing toward fewer congregations, what if the opposite were true? What we are asking in Minnesota is what if, instead of fewer, we had more, but the new ones were all really small on purpose? New saplings of fewer than ten people, that are mostly led by lay people, with clusters overseen and supported by clergy. What if twelve of these small cell groups in a rural or urban setting gathered once a month in one of our traditionally structured congregations to have a big celebration and tell stories about how they are meeting God in their communities?

And that diverse ecology will need to be deeply interconnected. There is no such thing as a free-standing or independent tree. So why have we bought into the myth that communities of faith should be self-sustaining, that independence and autonomy are the goals? What you are working on here is such a powerful witness to the wider church. What does it look like to extend those deep interconnections across diocesan lines? What if you think about yourselves as a forest ecology more than a fixed institution? The future will require more diversity, and deeper connection.

It sounds crazy, and I will freely admit there is a very good chance it will not work. But we know simply carrying on as we have will not. So I'm making a choice: instead of acting like my only

option is to stay in a sinking ship, I'm going to get out and try to dance a little on the water. It's so clear to me you are doing that here, so what's the next faithful step?

Finally, we have to grow by designing smaller. Jesus told us to go and make disciples, but what we often hear is go and make big churches. Those aren't incompatible, of course, but they also are not the same thing. In my experience, apprenticing our lives to the way of Jesus can only happen through small gatherings of practice. I only know how Jesus makes any difference at all in my life when I'm sharing the deepest parts of who I am and what I'm struggling with a few other trusted disciples. I can't do that with two hundred, or even fifty or thirty others. So we are going small in Minnesota. This fall, we are launching an initiative to start ten small house churches, the purpose of which will be to seed more in the future. Many of our traditionally structured churches aren't going anywhere anytime soon, but it's clear we need to plant some flowers and saplings alongside those big, old, wonderful oak trees if the ecosystem is going to continue to thrive.

I took the title of this keynote—“All the trees of the field shall clap their hands”—from that soaring vision of returning from exile in Isaiah 55. On the eve of the people's long-awaited return, it's a vision of what the next season will look like. But it isn't just a return to what used to be. A whole new landscape is being designed, and the whole creation actively participates in what is being shaped. Even more than that, God is the agent. Just like the beauty of the Loess Hills were formed by nature doing its thing, the new landscape God promises is about God's power, God's ability, not our efforts. Exile, at its best, helps people relearn what it means to

depend entirely on God. We're living in the late stages of our own exile as a church, where our former power and privilege have eroded, and what will be next is not yet entirely clear. But we often operate as functional atheists. We talk about God as if God is an interesting idea, but we don't often expect that God is going to show up and do something in our lives and our communities. This is a moment when we are being invited to learn what it means to let go of all our anxious attempts to fix the church, and relearn what it means to depend entirely on God's provision in the wilderness.

This is a decisive moment for you, and for our whole church. It's clear to anyone who is paying even a little attention that the boat we've been sailing in isn't going to get us to where we need to go. We don't have a choice about getting out of the boat. actually always been true for God's people. Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Ruth, Esther, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Mary, and Peter, Paul. All of them were called to leave what they knew behind, and trust entirely in God's mighty power to save. That's the question for us in this very moment. Can we leave behind trying to fix ourselves, and start seeking God's healing together. We are going to have to get out of the boat whether we want to or not. The question is: are we going to freeze with fear as the waves consume us, or are we going to learn to dance on the water, joyfully riding the waves of the Spirit, until the whole world is flooded with perfect love?