

“More Than We Can Imagine”

Joshua 1:5b; Matthew 28:20b; and Eph. 3:20,21

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) – Iowa City/Coralville

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Throughout the bible as a whole, there are many verses that reassure God's people that they will never be completely left on their own. In Joshua, as he is about to take on leadership from Moses and enter the promised land, he begins to doubt himself and feel fear. God says to him in Joshua chapter 1, verse 5b:

As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Those are familiar words to us as we have heard Jesus say them to his disciples, as well as these in Matthew chapter 28, verse 20b as he prepares them for ministry without his physical presence:

And surely I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Ephesus encouraged them as Gentiles to receive the mystery and majesty of God's grace through Christ, blesses them and ends with giving God the glory with these words in Ephesians chapter 3, verses 20 and 21:

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

May God expand our imagination and capacity for understanding of these words.

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I chose our three little bible verses intentionally to show how, in the bible, God promises to be with God's people wherever they go. And God has a big picture plan that is beyond our imagination. “More Than We Can Imagine” was the theme of an event Arnie and I spent a week in July attending. It's a Presbyterian event called Synod School. The theme immediately intrigued me. And as is often the case, two songs came to mind. The Beatles' "Imagine" and Mercy Me's "I Can Only Imagine". I'm kind of partial to 60s music. The artists back then often put into words my thoughts, dreams, and ideals. They also expressed my

vision of little things like world peace, and racial equality, women's rights, the things I was taught to pledge and mean in school like liberty and justice for all.

Mercy Me came along and dared to wonder out loud “what it will be like when we meet Jesus face to face. What will my heart feel? Will I dance for you Jesus or in awe of you be still? Will I stand in your presence or to my knees will I fall? Will I sing hallelujah, will I be able to speak at all? I can only imagine,” they say.

Me, too. I can only imagine the mystery. If I were a psalmist, I might say it is too wonderful for me.

This year's Synod School was pretty wonderful! This year 544 participants, including 133 children and youth, from 28 different states. Convocation, youth programs and classes, adult classes, choose 4 from 70, 3 buffet meals a day with soft serve ice cream 24/7, art share time, worship, evening events like movies, dance, mini courses, continued conversations with convocation speakers, board games, open mic talent night, just hanging out.

Synod School is a Faith community that covenants to practice kingdom living. And we do so pretty successfully.

Always includes mission opportunities. This year we purchased and packed 531 Hygiene kits for PDA for use in a disaster or extreme poverty situation. Blood drive with SO donors. Scholarship offering for first timers next year \$6600 so far, middle schoolers made over 50 ‘snackle’ bags for nursing home folks, and a day for local summer lunch program.

Worship led by Burns Stanfield, picture a Christian Elton John-energy level.

Opening every day with Mr. Rogers and his lessons and love for all. We were reminded that we are all neighbors, and we were about to have a snappy day.

Classes explored the spirituality of secular things like Bob Moss show, MASH, songs from the 60s and 70s, deep bible studies, political and justice issues, ultimate sports, arts of writing, painting, knitting, tie dying, dance and improv, jam sessions, various cooking, whatever anyone submits to offer to teach

Our Convocation speaker was Dr. Corey Schlasser-Hall. He taught us a new word I love: shalomify. How can and should we, as the church, be shalomifying the world?

One way you don't shalomify is by arguing whether you call a potluck offering a hot dish or a casserole, which is an inside joke between Minnesotans and Wisconsinites on one side,

and lowans and Nebraskans on the other. You know every church has had silly divisions over unimportant issues, don't you?

You've probably also been involved in a conversation of some sort lamenting something that is no longer happening in church that used to happen. We tend to practice an amnesia-like nostalgia of the good ole days that may, in reality, not have been so good. It is important for church folk to practice letting go sacra mentally of whatever needs to be let go. Of celebrating the life of a program, or model of practice, but letting it die with gratitude and grace. Then open up with the awareness of unlimited possibility and opportunity as you grow into the future.

I, for one, am tired of the lament over sports on Sunday, or where are the young people, or I like the old hymns. One person said, "we need to stop blaming everything and everyone else, and look at what we, the church, are refusing to change" I say, yes, let's stop catastrophizing change. When talking of revitalization or new possibilities, Corey said, "Leave your whining at the door and let's make this thing happen." He was referring to using our imagination.

Presbyterians, when ordained as elders or deacons, promise to serve with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. During that week together, we elevated imagination to innovation and its corresponding actions. Innovators have ideas, lots of ideas. Churches on the incline welcome innovation. New ministries, new outreach, new mission, is embraced and practiced in and outside the four walls. The building is utilized in many ways. Who of you consider yourselves to be innovators? Let's hear your ideas! The Ministry Planning team has a place for you!

Unfortunately, many churches reach a place of reclining. They can coast along and preserve the institutional church. They can get comfortable, which leads to complacency, which limits us to conservation or preservation of our existing routines rather than an exciting, continuing passion for becoming a disciple of Jesus the Christ. There's a danger in reclining, we may find ourselves riding a line of delusion, thinking we're doing fine, while treading water, but sooner or later, we get tired and sink. and churches go into a state of decline, which may eventually lead to hospice care. Let's not ever go there!

From what I've seen we won't any time soon. Our leadership did an excellent job navigating through the COVID crisis. Children's and youth programming has used imagination to stay alive and thriving. Our recent capital campaign used a collective imagination to envision a more inclusive and welcoming worship setting as well as adding to our ministry outreach and giving.

Sometimes people don't want to face the chaos or grief of change. They fear change or restructuring because they might lose something. Fear paralyzes growth, (not talking about numbers). I wonder if we might intentionally refocus our fear to the fear of missing those possibilities and opportunities God places in front of us.

Old habits are hard to break. Sometimes they need an intervention.

We must continue to make a conscious decision to nurture our minds and orient them for imagination.

For disciple formation that sends us out...after we listen to our communities' needs, dreams, visions, after our innovators share what gifts and talents they see that we could be being using, after we practice creating an ongoing season of discernment and introspection, after we look for intersections of us as church and us in the secular world; then we start growing our shalomification skills. And we always hold space for the next new thing God wants to partner with us in doing. We dare to look into, to check in with the future (talk about time spaciousness).

Our first preacher Elana Streets-Stuart spoke about her morning glory seeds. They make a ping-pong sound, then burst and scatter. She likened ideas to those seeds as surprises waiting to happen, saying 'pick me, I'm ready to grow.'

One of Dr. Corey's teaching points was the mixed economy of ministry.

The possibility of using your space to generate income if needed. Some examples would be to rent out rooms to small business owners, or your kitchen to food truck vendors. You look for the intersection of what you have that someone else could use to prosper. You partner with other groups in the community to meet a need. You dream big. You build God's kingdom. You shalomify God's beloved people. You stop thinking of us and them and think of us and the church who is not yet. The denomination has guidelines to ensure you keep a non-profit status. I assume because of the preschool, we already know how to do this. Perhaps we can imagine more?

Tell two stories. One with millions, concerned about rear ends in the pew. One with a building and no idea how to use it. Oh my word! If only I would have had such a gift to work/play/dream with.

As Corey said, 'find a way to get yourself in the Spirit's slip stream.'

Would you like to do that? Would you like to serve with elevated imagination alongside your energy, intelligence, and love? Explore your next step? Choose hope? Maybe choose to be the source of hope in this community? Take part in shalomifying the world? Whether as an individual, or as a church congregation, You're not too small. You're not too old. You're not too tired. You're not too uneducated. You're not too uncaring. You're not inadequately resourced. The Spirit slip stream is all around us. Catch a wave and ride it. Start shalomifying today! How exciting is that?

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