

Seasons of the Future

Rev. Louise Green

Delivered on Nov. 14, 2010

Reading: *Ecclesiastes 3, A Time for Every Season*

As you can see in your Order of Service, the sermon was going to be *Change and Spiritual Impasse*, by Rev. Rob Hardies. Well, there *has* been a change, and a spiritual impasse. Rob has encountered the flu, and so I'm here in the pulpit!

The title for this sermon is *Seasons of the Future*. In our reading from Ecclesiastes, we heard of a time for every purpose. It is easy to become passive in our living, and simply watch these seasons unfold. Yet the rhythms of our lives are made with our own choices about day-to-day, week-to-week, month-to-month cycles. Therefore it is necessary to step back from the repeating seasons in order to imagine a different future. What is the world in which we want to live? How will we design our seasons to lead down pathways not yet visited?

When we establish a mission for any congregation or organization, we are designing into the future. We say the All Souls mission is to be a diverse, justice-seeking, spirit-growing community that welcomes all souls. We are living out that charge, and know we are still on the path forward. We *are* diverse, and want to be more so. We *do* seek justice, and there's much more action to come. We *have* expanded our spirits, and are still deepening as individuals and congregation.

I believe there is a special environment here at All Souls, one that feels dynamic, fluid, full of possibility. In this place, we are building a community that will grow towards our mission: diverse, spirit-growing, justice-seeking. Still a work in progress, and yet it's already happening. We on board the moving train, building while it's running forward. We are leading from the future.

The challenging work of building beloved community represents a vision of a future not the norm. This future is transformational, involving ongoing change over time. It is counter-cultural, without many models of completed work in this arena, not many congregations we can use as examples. This future is transcendent, reflecting the values we hold in spiritual/ethical communities. Values such as the belief that we are greater than the sum of our parts. A belief that we have collective interests larger than our individual concerns, that we can stand for the whole in solidarity or

accompaniment. We experience church evolving over time, honoring repeating seasons, giving credit to previous generations, able to create the future again and again.

In a book entitled Embracing Diversity, Charles Foster studies a handful of successful congregations that have named diversity as critical to their mission. His focus is on the visionary leaders who drive that change toward multi-cultural, multiracial community. He interviews many congregants and staff who see new possibilities for this kind of future. In this work of creating beloved community, Foster identifies the two central qualities of these visionary leaders as *celebration* and *anticipation*.

First, he says that we need leaders who believe that, “*diversity is not a problem to be overcome; it is a gift to be celebrated.*” Not a problem, but a gift. Not something to overcome, but something to celebrate. Dialogue across difference is challenging, and we must make concrete plans to increase our welcome. Yet, we can undermine our success with constant thought of how far we have to go. What would it mean to celebrate who is here now--to see the true gift of our present diversity, acknowledge and claim it?

We rejoice that here we have souls of all ages who are Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, African, American Indian, Arab, African-American, Afro-Caribbean, Euro-American. We have four generations of congregants under the same roof, with strong seniors, a baby and toddler boom, and all the decades in between represented in our pews. We welcome those who are lesbian and transgender, straight and gay, immigrant and citizen, those with many sorts of abilities, special needs, and special gifts, those from many different spiritual traditions and humanist values. We are growing each month, and so hope to welcome even more voices, more diversity. This is rare in the world of the progressive liberal church. We can celebrate how unique All Souls already is in our city, our denomination, and our nation.

The second central aspect of innovative leadership in multicultural congregations is anticipation. Foster found this from talking to leaders:

Anticipatory leaders as a matter of course see a situation or event from the future rather than from the past. They rarely ask questions about how things have been done (even though they may have a keen historical consciousness); instead they ask about how things might be done.

This is a critical skill, because the work of building a diverse community is transformational, counter-cultural, and transcendent. It goes beyond any particular season we can imagine. We don't have a lot of examples to go on. We don't know the whole map, just a piece of the puzzle here, a piece there, still gazing out into a new mission.

Anticipatory leaders are at that crucial pivot point, suspended between past and future. Memories come from past seasons, the experience of our individual lives and cultural histories that shape us. We stand together now, with a range of choices every day as we create our present seasons. The present is the place of pro-activity, in anticipation of the future we desire, a vision that pulls us forward with hope and passion.

What are the choices you are making for your vision, here or in other places? How are you leading from the future? I'd like to offer some practical suggestions for expanding your view.

First, examine your relationships, in the church, at work, with friends, in the community. Make a list of the twenty folks you relate to the most, and observe the similarities and differences among them. Then find a way to hear a different story, engage in fresh dialogue. Meet some new people, one on one, and listen. Whoever we relate to most often is reinforcing our status quo, our worldview, rather than creating new possibilities. You are the anticipatory leader: are you passive or proactive?

Next think about the five ways you engage most at All Souls: attending worship, special events, groups, social opportunities, service activities. Are you making time for anything different, or are you stuck repeating the same seasons? Is there a new area that intrigues you? You are the designer: are you reactive or creating?

Finally, being a leader in a multi-cultural vision of transformation requires ongoing awareness of, and comfort with, difference. Challenge yourself out of your comfort zone, and shake it up a little. Get out more! How can you create increasing awareness of, and comfort with, diverse voices? How can you expand your horizons? Find things that bring a new voice or perspective to your cultural lens--a movie, book, article, TV show, conversation in the corner store or Metro, a family experience or excursion in the city. You are the one taking action here: are you always moving in the same tracks, or are you choosing to learn in new ways?

Our congregational vision for the future is the dream of the welcome table in every season. With this mission, we are subverting the dominant culture, transcending the daily realities that would keep us divided. When we lead from this place, we are transforming ourselves, our congregation, and our city.

I close with the words of UU minister, Victoria Safford:

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope—not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrow; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right.” But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see.

May it be so. Amen.