

Exploring Progressive Christianity 1
July 21, 2024
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As I mentioned earlier, the idea for this series came from conversations with church leadership. These conversations began in January when the Board gathered for a retreat. You may remember I wrote about it in January newsletter, but that was a long time ago. Part of that retreat was spent brainstorming three questions. The first question was, "What do you think the world will be like in 30 years?" I will admit that some of the responses to that question did not give me much incentive to take care of myself.

The picture the Board painted of the future was quite a mixed bag. The Board predicted:

- the population will be older (so maybe the collective wisdom of the world will be greater, but an older population creates very practical problems in healthcare and Social Security)
- cold fusion will be perfected
- the wealth disparity will be greater
- there will be less in-person gathering
- Artificial Intelligence (AI) will play a greater role
- the U.S. will have universal healthcare (we were very divided on this)
- the U.S. will have had a female president (we also wondered what our democracy would look like)
- climate change will be a much greater threat

Honestly, the air in the room was heavy. It was fearful, but it was honest and real. As we plan for the future, these responses must be considered because some of these predictions will undoubtedly come to pass and that is scary for us to think about. We have to be prepared for whatever comes next. But the future of DCC cannot be based on fear. It must be based on hope, for we are called to be bringers of hope.

So, the second question was a little different, "What do you hope the world will be like in 30 years?" The air was instantly lighter in the room:

- people will be able to retire comfortably
- food insecurity and homelessness will no longer exist
- schools will be safe
- the world will be safe
- there will be clean water for everyone
- people will do more listening
- the wealth disparity will be less
- there will be unity on the important things

I invite you to give yourself permission to daydream for a moment. Can you imagine this kind of world? A world where people have what they need. A world where all of creation is valued. A world where we won't have to talk about creating safe space

anymore because the whole world will be safe. This is the first part of the plan...imagining a different world. A world where hope flourishes and fear is put to rest. If we can't even imagine it, we can't work toward it in meaningful ways.

As we plan for the future, our plan must take into account what we fear, but it must be based on what we hope for. As I looked at the list of what we hope for, the thing that stood out to me is that in a room full of church leaders, nobody hoped "every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord," to use the words of Paul to the ancient church in Phillipi. Nobody hoped that the whole world would convert to Christianity. Nobody hoped other people would finally come around to their brand of spirituality. The world we hope for appears much more concerned with people having their needs met, with safety and belonging than it is right belief and conversion.

Keeping this in mind, the third question is a 2-parter we are still wrestling with, "How can DCC prepare for a future that seems both frightening and exciting, and what can we do to bring about the kind of world we hope for? As I've reflected on this question, what I always come back to is the phrase you hear from me often, "we are better together." This series will allow us to not only explore the beauty of the theological diversity that already exists in our congregation but also consider how we might articulate what we want for the world and how we are working toward it, essentially our purpose, in a way that includes people who are not already here. This church, in fact, our whole denomination, is held together by common purpose, not common belief. In other words, this means someone doesn't have to believe what I believe or what you believe about God or Jesus or the Bible to work toward a more hopeful future.

The stated purpose of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is: "We are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one Body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us." We are called to bring wholeness to a fragmented world. We are not called to believe all the same things or to force our beliefs on other people. We are called to theological diversity and friends, when we live into that and work together toward a common purpose, it is truly beautiful. It is not easy though.

In the last ten years, I've found myself, theologically, between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, there have been times amid theological discussions/arguments that I've been told that because of what I believe, I cannot call myself a Christian and that I would be a much better Unitarian. My response to that, first, is to define what I believe being a Christian is: "someone who tries to follow the ways of Jesus." And I do. In addition, I will not walk away from the ritual of communion. It is where I find connection with other people and with the Holy. So, yes, I am a Christian and I want to continue to be a Christian. On the other hand, in the last few years, I have said, more than once, "I am not sure I even want to identify as a Christian anymore." So many of

the things said and done in the name of Christianity have hurt my soul and made me physically sick. I have searched for something else to call myself, something that would distance what I believe from the Christians who use God to exclude, injure, and oppress other people. I wonder if any of you have experienced the same dilemma.

There is this attitude that if we don't believe the right things and some of the things we are told we must believe are very complex. I've said this before, but I think it is worth repeating, being a Christian has been made more complicated than it should be, and it hasn't served the world or Christianity very well. Too often doctrines, creeds, and cryptic religious language have separated people and forced us into the ways of us vs. them. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a non-creedal church. That means we do not recite the Nicene Creed or any other creed in corporate worship. This doesn't mean there aren't members of our churches who believe what is written in some creeds. There are. We don't recite them together because we cannot and do not assume everyone believes what is in them and whether we believe them or not, we are all welcome. The denomination is fond of saying, "no creeds but Christ." We do not want a creed to become a "test of fellowship." In other words, you don't belong if you don't believe. There is room for everyone who seeks to love and be loved in this denomination and at DCC. To me, the phrase "no creeds but Christ" supports my identity as a Christian. I am a Christian because I have chosen to try to follow Jesus' teachings as I understand them. I would be curious about what it means to you to say, "I am a Christian."

In the next few weeks, we will explore the 8 Core Values of Progressive Christianity. These 8 values were originally published by an organization called The Center for Progressive Christianity founded by Jim Adams, the rector of St. Mark's Church on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. Adams and a small group of peers agreed they needed to provide a way to help "open and progressive" churches identify themselves. This was the genesis of the "Eight Points" defining Progressive Christianity. The "Eight Points" has gone through many revisions over the years – the latest version in 2022 updated the name to "The Core Values" defining Progressive Christianity.

I am less interested in the label "Progressive Christianity" than I am in the core values themselves. What I like about these core values is that they give us a starting point...a baseline from which to launch conversations and reflection. I imagine each core value is an answer to an unspoken question. Today's question is: Why do you (we) try to follow the ways of Jesus?

Here is the answer provided by core value 1:

"Following the path of the teacher Jesus can lead to healing and wholeness, a mystical connection to "God," as well as an awareness and experience of not only the Sacred, but the Oneness and Unity of all life."

I imagine that if we asked everyone to respond to the question, "Why do you try to follow the ways of Jesus" it is possible there would be as many different answers as we have people in this room. What I like about the statement by progressivechristianity.org is that it is a starting point, a place of unity in which we could all say, "Yes." Yes, we try to follow Jesus' ways because we believe they are a path to a better world and through them, we have a sense of connection. So, yes! There would be some of us, though, who would say, "Yes and..." In other words, some of us would agree with the statement but would add more to it. The statement itself, though, is simple enough and general enough that it would generate a hearty, "Amen!" Amen?

To talk about this core value, the place to begin is by exploring what following the path or ways of Jesus looks like.

Let's use the Gospel of John, chapter 13, verses 33-35.

[Jesus said to his disciples]," Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This passage comes along in the Gospel narrative right after Judas' departure from the last meal Jesus and the disciples had together. Jesus knew his time with the disciples was short, though the disciples didn't seem to get it. It was important to Jesus that they understood his message and so he put it as simply as he could: Love one another and when you do that, people will know you are my followers. Following Jesus means we love each other.

At this point, some of us may be thinking, "Yes, that's it! That's all being a Christian is...loving people." And some of us may be thinking, "Yes and..."

Yes, Jesus taught us to love other people, but there is more to following him than just loving.

There is room for all of us. I will say it again...there is room for all of us.

For you, following Jesus may be very simple...love people.

For you, following Jesus may include loving people and believing God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, make up the trinity.

Following Jesus may include loving people and confessing your sins to a clergy person.

Following Jesus may include loving people and being baptized. And you may understand baptism differently than the person sitting next to you.

Following Jesus may include loving people and seeing communion symbolically as the body and blood of Jesus.

Following Jesus may include loving people and understanding Jesus' death as an atonement for your sins.

Following Jesus may include loving people and not believing there is a God or not being sure yet. There is room for all of this and for many more “ands.”

None of these “ands” are reasons to take sides or to point fingers and declare ourselves right and others wrong. None of these “ands” change our common purpose. None of these “ands” make it impossible to live out our core values: Welcome, Grow, and Serve. It isn't that our theological differences don't matter, they do. They make us richer. They bring us perspective. In addition, this theological diversity serves as a model for our neighbors. Yes, it is possible to exist in loving community, believing different things, and sharing a common purpose. It is more than possible, dear ones, it is beautiful.

Following the ways of Jesus is following the way of Love. Christianity is nothing without Love. Our hope for the world is Love. Please spend time this week reflecting on the world you hope for and the ways you and we can bring it to be. We are always better together. Amen.