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FCC's Vision: Re-Claim and Re-Commit II. Some Painful Realities

Ezra 3:1-3 and 4:1-3 When the seventh month came, and the Israelites were in the towns, the people gathered together in Jerusalem. Then Jeshua son of Jozadak, with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel with his kin set out to build the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as prescribed in the law of Moses the man of God. They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighboring peoples, and they offered burnt offerings upon it to the LORD, morning and evening.... When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria who brought us here." But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of families in Israel said to them, "You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia has commanded us."

There is a church in Hilo, Hawaii, that always got my attention whenever I drove by it. It's not because it's an especially beautiful church; it's not. It's architecture is functional rather than beautiful. And it's not because it had a fence around the property; sadly, that's not terribly uncommon with lots of churches in lots of places that, like that particular congregation, are in parts of town that can be more than a little sketchy after dark. No, this otherwise unremarkable church building always got my attention, because of the two signs prominently displayed on either side of the entrance to its parking lot. One said (in both Hawaiian and English) "**E Koko Mai! Welcome!**" The other sign, immediately opposite from it said in stern red lettering "**NO TRESPASSING.**" Welcome! No Trespassing! Can there be any better example of *ambivalence*? Ambivalence. St. Augustine, perhaps the greatest and most influential

of the earliest Church Fathers in the centuries after Jesus, is perhaps most famous for a memorable prayer he once offered before his final conversion to the Christian faith: *“Lord, give me chastity. But not yet.”* Ambivalence. Ask any counselor or therapist and he or she will tell you that one of the things most often seen in therapy is folks who are sending mixed messages; on the one hand they say they want to be better at intimacy and on the other hand they do things that push that very sort of closeness away.

Ambivalence.

Ambivalence. Mixed feelings. Yes and no. It is the human condition, sometimes. And we can see a perfect example of a faith community’s ambivalence in our scripture for this morning. You will recall that we are in the second week of our 4 part series on re-claiming and re-committing to First Christian Church’s “Ministry and Vision Statement,” the highlights of which are printed there in your bulletin. We are using the experience of the Hebrew people as they returned home to Jerusalem after being in exile in Babylon for 70 years as our guide, our mirror, and, as we shall see, sometimes as a warning. Last week I said that in our own way we too, along with the rest of the mainline church in America, have been in our own sort of “exile” from the way things used to be, from the way that the culture all around us was so supportive of church, and instead now find ourselves, even here in the Springs, in a much less supportive culture and one where so many more people than ever before don’t count themselves a part of any faith tradition. And I said our first job is to understand and accept those changes, not just lament them or wish they were otherwise.

So, as we follow and learn from our ancient Hebrew forebears, we can see oh-so-clearly in this morning’s continuation of the story of their return the sort of deep

ambivalence that also marks both us and those around us. There's no mistaking the Hebrew people's ambivalence is there; did you hear it? *"They set up the altar on its foundation, because they were in dread of the neighboring peoples...."* Now, if we updated their ambivalence to today, we might say instead *"Who **are** these people around us? They don't seem to know the 'rules' about church. They seem so different from the church folks we grew up with. They like different music. They dress differently."* And even if "dread" is too strong a word, we need to know that if we are truly to be people, as our Ministry and Vision Statement says, of radical hospitality and truly welcoming, we will need to ask God to help us stop thinking or certainly saying such things! For *any* ambivalence on our parts – instead of our full-throated, open-armed hospitality – **WILL** be perceived by those who find their way to us seeking depth, meaning, and hope. And let's face it: who wants to be somewhere where folks are ambivalent about you're being there!

It is also crucial that we understand is that the ambivalence goes in both directions. For if we have mixed feelings about the culture around us and about how different folks are, we also need to realize that so many of those un-churched folks I talked about last week are just as ambivalent, have just as many mixed feelings about **us!** And this too the Hebrew people experienced. A little bit later in the book of Ezra, the people who have watched the return of the Hebrews and watched as they began to try to rebuild the city and the temple write a letter to the Persian king in which they described the Hebrew people this way: *"You will discover... that this is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces...."* (Ezra 4:15) Now, the Hebrew people would have been

aghast: *“That’s not us!”*, they would have said. “No! We have come to bring good, to do good, to be good neighbors, to hope that there will be peace throughout the land.”

That’s how they saw themselves, even if those around them were deeply ambivalent about their actions. But the very same thing happens today: You and I hear descriptions of the church from critics and observers outside of it that leave us flabbergasted. We hear folks describe church as boring or bigoted, we hear folks say *“well, they’re only interested in taking care of their own.”* We hear folks charge the church with being smug and selfish, self-satisfied in its certitude that only it is right and that everyone else is wrong. We hear folks say of the church that it hurts more than it helps. And we are flabbergasted. We don’t understand. We don’t understand why folks would have mixed feelings about the church, much less hostile ones!

But here’s the thing: we may not understand or appreciate the reasons for so much of the culture’s ambivalence or even anger at the church because we have almost always found the church a place of love, a place of grace, a place where folks walk beside us and hold us through life’s worst, and cheer us on in the midst of life’s best. So many of us walk into this sanctuary, or countless ones like it, and feel a deep and profound and visceral sense of rightness, of goodness, of hope. And thanks be to God for that. But here is the painful reality: so much of the world around us has not had that experience of “church.” Let me share a couple of examples:

Barbara and I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for seven and a half years. Once a month, like clockwork, a handful of folks from the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, would come to San Francisco to do demonstrations. These are the folks, you may have noticed lately, who picket the funerals of soldiers who were killed in

the Middle East and who carry signs saying things like God is happy that the soldier is dead because America is a sinful country. Odious and vile, isn't it? And when these folks would come to San Francisco each month, they would take to the streets of San Francisco with their signs that said "God Hates Fags." That, by the way, is even the name of the church's website: GodHatesFags.com. Now, here's the thing: you and I know that these vile and odious and awful actions do not represent the God that we know and believe in. But each and every month, also just like clockwork, the Bay Area television and radio stations would cover these demonstrations and invariably the way those reports would start out would be like this: *"Members of the Westboro Baptist Church, on their monthly mission trip..."* I cringed whenever I heard the news anchor say those words. Because for you and me, both the words "church" and "mission" are life-giving words, words that point to realities that make a difference in the world for God.

But you have to remember: we're not in a "church culture" any more, we're not in Christendom, and so many people watching those reports would say themselves, *"Why in the world would I ever want to go to a **church** of all places to find a deeper meaning to my life? No way; if that's what 'church' means then **I want no part of it.**"* Repeat that sort of story hundreds of times, to people who really have never personally experienced "church," and it will have an effect. And there will be deep, deep skepticism about the church in the culture around us. There will be a presumption among lots of folks that the word "church" is a synonym for the word "bigot." In fact, study after study of twenty- and thirty somethings over last 10 years shows that a

growing majority of the non-church folks, even those who identify themselves as politically conservative, do not understand why what they see as “the church” is so obsessed about the issues of sexuality, so intent, it seems, on bashing the folks they work with and know in daily life.

And what’s more, even where folks outside of the church are not *hostile* toward the church, precisely because this is no longer a “church culture,” no longer Christendom, so many people simply don’t know the rules, don’t know what goes on in the church, haven’t been a part of a church in the way even non-church folks were in the 1950s and ‘60s. You and I simply have no idea how terrifying it can be to walk in these doors and down these aisles. Many of the folks that will come to our church and so many others are in a situation where the intensity of their longing for something deeper in their lives, or the pain that they are feeling, finally one Sunday morning trumps their fear of coming through these doors, trumps their worries that maybe the media was right and that this is a place that will be bigoted or banal or boring.

So in the face of those painful realities, in the face of both our honest ambivalence at times about the state of things around us and the world’s ambivalence about the whole idea of “church,” what do we do? Particularly what do we do as we seek to re-claim and re-commit to our Ministry and Vision Statement, part of which says this: *“We will be a community of faith, radical in hospitality, outrageous in generosity and joyful in service to God and neighbor.”* Well, in one sense, the answer is simple:

Whenever you have the opportunity, talk about what kind of church First Christian is. Talk about the fact that we do not have any ideological and theological

“tests.” Talk about the fact that we truly do try to live out our belief that our unity in Christ is something that is our rock in the face of those things that would try to divide us. Talk about the fact that we understand God to be not a tyrant or a bully, but a God of grace and gentleness who calls people to acts of kindness and justice for all people. Be attentive to the opportunities you have to talk about these things. I know that so many of you run from the word “evangelism,” and I understand why; too often it’s been associated with words like “pushy”; you want to respect people’s privacy and that’s a good thing. But there are times in the most unlikely place where the person next to you will express something that ought to lead you to understand that he or she could very well be in a mood to hear some good news, to hear of a place where a good God of grace and gentleness is worshiped with joy, to hear of a place that offers hope and healing and which doesn’t exist in order to bash on people.

And I’m going to give you a tool for this. I’ve long thought that it isn’t just ministers that should have business cards, but members too. So I created one. It has our First Christian’s contact information on it and at the bottom it says this: *“Where you won’t be judged, where you won’t be told what you ‘have to’ believe, where **EVERYONE** is truly welcome!”* I’m going to have these cards with me at the door after worship. I want you to take one and tuck it in your wallet or purse. And when you have one of those encounters in the grocery store or on the airplane or in what may seem the unlikeliest of places where someone has a need that you know First Christian Church could speak to, then give them that card. I hope we run out of these this morning. We’ll print more. I hope that these will soon be in the wallets and on the refrigerators of

folks all over town who will one day remember that encounter with you, will one day be yearning for something deeper in their lives, will one day be seeking something they may not even know how to name – and that little card (and the conversation they had with you) will send them through these doors.

Where we will welcome them, won't we? Welcome them **NOT** with any ambivalence, **NOT** with any mixed feelings, but with sheer joy and, indeed, with radical hospitality, at what God can do through us and through them in this place. May it be so