

This past week your pastor was on the Carnival Inspiration cruising to Ensenada Mexico and back. Now if you are like Louisville (that is our denominational headquarters, that pays for my expenses as a mentor pastor for the Company of New Pastors) you might not have been too pleased with a cruise for a spiritual retreat. To be honest I wasn't exactly sure how it work out either, other than our accommodations and meals were all taken care of and a cruise meant nobody could leave early, which has been problematic for our group. Once you are on the ship - you have to stay on the ship, as it is the only way home! Planning was also simple, given that one individual from our group handled all the details. So, the majority of us just had to show up and then everything else was provided.

I remember my thoughts as I boarded the ship midday on Monday, as it was sensory overload. I don't know if you have ever been on a cruise, but it is a bit overwhelming at first. Everyone wants to take your photo. Visual stimulation bombards you from every direction and sounds blare announcements of welcome as the fun is supposed to begin immediately. Of course, the Lido Deck on this particular ship was ready for hungry travelers with a taco bar, a burger bar and Italian bar, not to mention pizza and endless soft serve ice cream. More food choices than one could ever eat. Excess is an easy way to describe the experience of a cruise.

Yet, we had gathered for the topic of Prayer. Five new pastors, and me as their mentor pastor, had gathered to spend time together exploring prayer practices. As our time unfolded together, our passages this morning came to life for me, as our experience of prayer in the midst of this cruise became a metaphor for how we sow. Do we sow sparingly or generously with our very lives?

Our first night at dinner, we had five empty chairs at our assigned table. One empty chair we expected, as one of the new pastors canceled just a week before the cruise. Then at dinner on the second night two additional couples arrived at our assigned table to fill four of the empty chairs. These two couples had got lost the night before, which is easy to do on a cruise ship of 14 levels and four distinct sections on each floor. So, on Monday night they gave up trying to find their assigned dining room and table, and settled for the dining area that is open almost around the clock.

As our dinner began our Tuesday night, we thought it was appropriate to introduce ourselves, but we asked the couples first, "So what do you all do for a living?" The two men from the new couples looked at each other and said, "We are not sure we should tell you." All six of us pastors burst out laughing and said, "Well, the same holds true for us!" So, we declared our table safe space, given that our laughter had broken the ice. They shared they worked in oil fields, including the controversial fracking work in their home state of Utah. Then they shared of their large families and that yes, they were Mormon. Yet, the guys confessed that they never went on their mission and that as families they weren't very active in their local wards. They finally turned the table and asked us. Well, all six of us are Presbyterian pastors! The response was more than we could have hoped for, "That's awesome!" they said.

The ten of us enjoyed each other's company and even were reprimanded by an adjacent table for having too much fun. I guess our laughter was a bit too loud for them. Of course, right after we were reprimanded the party in the dining hall let loose and waiters were dancing as music was blaring. If you want a quiet dining experience, I would not suggest a cruise liner! We sang, laughed and enjoyed each other's company our first evening together. We left dinner that evening filled both body and soul.

As we gathered again for dinner on Wednesday night with our new-found friends, one of the proverbs came to mind, “The world of the generous gets larger and larger.” Our world got larger because we didn’t choose to eat only with our pastoral group. Our world got larger because we decided to book a cruise, rather than a secluded retreat center. Our world got larger because we shared generously of who we were with those we met.

Now our passages today could be read in light of material riches only, given that generosity is often associated with money, and given that Apostle Paul was speaking to the faithful in Ephesus about a monetary gift they had promised to share with the saints of Macedonia. They had collected generously and now Paul was just making sure they were ready give what was generously collected cheerfully.

But, back to the dining room: The richness of our time together on Wednesday evening was even more amazing, as a chaplain among us noticed something stirring in the couple she was sitting next to. They quietly shared with her, “Our eldest son just committed suicide in September.” They shared of their confusion and pain of their loss. They shared that they invited their friends to come with them, because they weren’t sure they could be alone on this cruise that had been long planned before the tragic loss of their son. The woman sitting next to me shared of her anxiety of being at sea, as her youngest of four children was only 4 years old and she knew she could not swim if there were an emergency. She wanted to enjoy herself, yet she worried about what could happen. She had watched too many movies about sinking ships! I asked her about the resources of her faith to hold her worry. She confessed she was new to the Mormon faith, making a commitment only a few years earlier, although she had been married to her husband for 17 years.

As dinner progressed the men shared with us of their faith and what they understood of heaven as well as Jesus. And then they asked the six of us, “Who is Jesus for you?” They listened attentively as one among us shared, for our understandings were a bit different. The conversation was rich and respectful, attentive to the pain and anxiety shared with us. As a table, we had to be chased out of the dining room, so it could be reset for the late dining hour. Yet, we weren’t ready to go our separate ways, so all ten of us went to the comedy hour. Then we excused ourselves for our time of evening prayer, while they held seats for us for the late comedy hour. “The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed.” We blessed each other abundantly that night!

Yet, how was my recent cruise experience a metaphor of our lived faith, as we consider our commitments for 2018? We had so many options for our final official Company of New Pastor Gathering, with most options taking us to a secluded retreat center. Our week would have been rich, but it would not have been expansive. We would not have had the opportunity to enlarge our world by including others in our conversations, our laughter and our tears.

I believe we have this choice every day of our lives, for life as a reformed Christian, whether pastor or parishioner, is not to be lived within the secluded walls of a retreat center or within the perceived safety of these church walls and church community. Life as a reformed Christian is to be lived in the messiness of life within our cultural context, with all its demands and distractions, with all its variety of peoples.

When we gather as a church to worship, study and fellowship, it is meaningful and rich. Yet, if we don’t engage those outside of this church, our world will grow smaller and not larger,

as our dear saints join the church triumphant. If we only include those who are already among us, then we will miss the richness of new relationships and new insights.

One of the pastors in our group confessed that she silently hoped that our empty dinner table seats would not be filled. She wanted them to stay empty so that we could just enjoy each other's company. She wanted it just to be us.

Isn't this what we often do in the church? We get so comfortable being us that we forget that we are called to sow generously with others. We get so comfortable doing things the way we do things that we don't want to bring others in because we know they will bring change. We get so comfortable the status quo, even in our own lives, that we forget that our time, our talents, and our financial resources are not just gifts given to us by God for ourselves.

The world of the generous gets larger and larger; the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller. The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed; those who help others are helped. When we consider the gifts, we have been given – all of who we are and all of what we have – our faith calls us to be generous. Yet, generosity is more than just dollars. Generosity is a way of life. Generosity is the way to make our world larger and larger.

I may have shared this story before, but it is such a testament to a generous way of life. A woman in her later years lived in a care facility. She couldn't get out of bed without help, but she was generous with her very life. She had her daughter place a rocking chair in her room as well as an invitation on her door – come and sit a while, for I love to listen. This woman, whose world had shrunk to the confines of a bed without help, was the most visited person in the facility, from her family, to staff, to other loved one's family who just dropped in to sit for a while. Imagine how small her world would have been, had she not welcomed others into her life.

What about us? What commitments will we make to enlarge our world within this church, within our neighborhoods, within our communities? Will we sow sparingly, just maintaining the status quo or will we sow generously?

I wonder if anyone would like share about their commitments for the coming year. How will you give generously of yourself through this church? How will you give generously of yourself in our community? How will you sow generously with life so that your world and our world as a church gets larger and larger?

Congregational sharing...

God has provided us with every blessing in abundance, so that we might be abundant in every good work. Yet, as your pastor, I don't want you to make these commitments for 2018 reluctantly. I don't want you to feel forced to make these 2018 commitments. I desire for all of us to come and sit a while in the grace we have received. Then and only then will our responses be out of gratitude and given cheerfully.

My prayer for this church and for each one of us individually is that our world will get larger and larger simply because we choose to be generous – with our time, our energy, our talents, our financial resources, our gifts, our whole selves.

I know we all have empty seats at our table... we certainly have empty seats in this sanctuary... Will we welcome others to come and sit a while, so that we can generously share of

the abundance that we have received? Will we sow sparingly or generously with our lives, individually and as a church? I pray generously! Amen.