

FUN WITH VENN DIAGRAMS

a goodbye sermon preached by the Rev. Ruth Everhart at Palisades Community Church on 9/26/21.

Romans 12:9-21

Friends, it's hard to believe this is our last worship service together. Our time together has flown by. You are a small but mighty group and have accomplished so much under adverse circumstances. I was privileged to share leadership with you during this time of transition.

As the Palisades Hub takes on a new life, PCC's history is in the making RIGHT NOW. As I prepare to exit, I wrote a summary of our time together. I will send that out in the Wednesday email, along with photos.

Last Sunday we talked about the Pursuit of Hopefulness. We talked about the undertow in our life — and named the things that threaten to overwhelm us. Especially as this pandemic stretches on and life seems permanently altered.

Where do we find hope? We read from Romans last Sunday, and again this Sunday. I made the observation that the word Hope is used more in the epistles of the New Testament than in the gospel itself. Since Jesus is literally the embodiment of hope — when he walked on earth, I don't think the word was on everyone's tongue, because it was in front of everyone's eyes.

I do believe that faith is all about latching on to a source of hope that is trustworthy. And what that does — is give our actions direction.

Sometimes people confuse hope and optimism. Optimism is the attitude that everything is going to be fine. No matter what happens, everything is going to be just fine. Pessimism is the opposite, of course. Pessimism is the belief that no matter what happens, all is lost. Even if something appears to be good, for a moment, all is lost.

Rebecca Solnit is a feminist writer — and she has a definition of hope that resonates with me. She says that hope is living in the unstuck place between optimism and pessimism where action is possible. It's very logical. If optimists think everything's going to be fine, no matter what happens, they can excuse themselves from action. And pessimists think that all is hopeless, no matter what happens, and they excuse themselves from action. But hope lives in the unstuck middle place where agency is possible.

My theology is wrapped around the fact that I believe the Image of God in us is our agency. Our ability to make choices that matter.

As I look at the recent history of Palisades Community Church, I see a group of people working together to make choices that matter. As society changed, and the role of the church in the culture has shifted, the obvious result has been a largely negative one. The church is no longer central in American life. People don't automatically join a church, or participate.

There are many other faiths active in American culture, so to some people, it feels like Christians get elbowed aside. As all this has happened over the past few decades, the result is that Christian churches across the country are getting older and smaller — they are wrinkling and shrinking.

That describes what has happened to PCC. That has happened to many congregations in all different kinds of neighborhoods.

But you all dared to ask the question, How does PCC continue to be the church in this neighborhood? And a vision was cast by a few individuals — or perhaps it was shaped by folks working together. And the vision became a new way of being church. “In this lonely and isolated culture, bringing people together and providing acceptance and belonging” is a form of church.

This idea became the seed for the Palisades Hub — a welcoming place for people to gather and to connect, learn, and serve the neighborhood. Creating the Hub made sense on a couple of levels. It made sense as a response to the cultural shifts which I’ve mentioned.

One of the models for neighborhood centers, is sometimes called the model of the Third Place. Have you heard that term? Our First place is our home. Our second place is our work (although the pandemic has collapsed the distinction b/w those for many people, which has been one of the challenges of this past 18 months)

But what is our Third Place? The third place is where we encounter the world on a social and cultural level. The third place is where we engage our neighbors — our neighbors in geography, our neighbors in shared interests.

The third place used to be, I’m told, in the days of yore, our front porch. It was also the Rotary Club, and the local library, and yes, the local church. All that has shifted. Voluntary organizations such as the Rotary club struggle. and yes, churches have lost the place in American life.

The truth is that very few of us spend our evenings engaging the world from a front porch. With television and literally endless forms of entertainment, we have all moved inside, literally & figuratively. And now, due to the nature of politics, we are all in our little silos, where we listen to people of like minds.

You can see that the Palisades Hub has been born at a crucial moment. Our society craves a new form of Third Place, a new way for us to engage our neighbors, our world.

Creating the Palisades Hub also made sense on a logistic level. One of the changes that happened over a period of decades, was that managing the building and the tenants had become a larger and larger part of the pastor’s job. The church has had to use the resource of the building, not just as a gift to the community, but as an economic asset to stay afloat because the church’s financial obligations could no longer be met through pledges and in the plate giving.

So the idea of spinning off the building to have its own life, separate from the faith community, was a response to a number of problems. In doing this, I think the spirit of the gospel has been evident.

We just read a section from Romans chapter 12:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. . . . Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

I love that last line — which uses a semicolon between two phrases — contributing to the needs of saints and extending hospitality to strangers. The brilliance of the Hub model is that it is doing precisely these two things at the same time. The Hub is contributing to the needs of saints and extending hospitality to strangers. Well played!

Birthing the Palisades Hub was an act of hope — not just optimism, not just fighting pessimism, it was an act powered by that *unstuck* place — the place between optimism and pessimism — the place where our action matters.

And as I see the event list at the Hub — they're not stuck! They are moving! There are lectures and concerts. There are contract renewals happening. There are shifts about which rooms in the building are used for what. I'm sure you have had various emotions about those changes. Anytime significant change happens, it involves grief, as the old way is no longer. There is also excitement as a new way comes into being. One of the huge shifts here is the role of the pastor. I am the first pastor at this church who isn't charged with thinking about the building.

Think about that. I can care about the building, I can continue to be a steward of the building. But it hasn't been my JOB to worry about things like flooded basements, and telephone systems, and rental agreements.

Instead, I have been concerned with other things — leading worship each Sunday, being involved with the search for the new pastor, taking care of membership tasks, and learning how to support the Hub, while keeping out of the way.

Can you feel what a significant shift this is? That's important to name, especially as you move into a relationship with a new pastor. It also may shift YOUR relationship to this church. Which part of PCC did you engage in the past? Which part did you love? Were you involved with the building and neighborhood activities? Were you a Hub person?

Or were you primarily centered around worship? The preaching of the Word — the sharing of music? the exploration of spiritual ideas and themes? Were you primarily engaged with the faith community?

As I asked myself these questions, I wondered about the overlapping areas of the Hub and the faith community. So, being a visual person, I wanted to create a Venn diagram. I worked with Sylvia Becker and Bill Wilson, to put it on paper — how are the two entities related?

We came up with a diagram — very simple, 2 overlapping circles — the Hub and the Faith Community. All of which are surrounded by PCC. This is true in a legal, or technical, sense.

But this Venn diagram didn't seem adequate, so we made a second one, where the 2 smaller circles, burst out of the PCC circle.

I'd like to invite you to consider the diagrams. We can add to them — we can write words in the places of overlap. Where do various programs (existing or potential) belong? Where do individuals belong? Where is the area of growth and potential and creativity?

Where will the Good News burst forth?

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

