

Friends, I don't mind telling you that this week was one of the most trying in the ongoing process of our federation.

This week, the tempter came seeking to divide us...hoping we would fight and rend ourselves apart. There were forces mounting that could have sledgehammered a wedge in our efforts to grow together in trust.

I don't much believe in The Devil; an evil presence lurking around each corner waiting for an opportune time to pounce.

Instead, I believe that evil presents itself, out of the human spirit, seeking self-interest and relishing division.

There's no doubt in my mind that this spirit has worked and will continue to do so in people of all times and places.

The story from Isaiah that Linda just finished reading speaks exactly into what I mean. A mighty, foreign power comes to parley with lowly Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. The northern kingdom, Israel, has already succumbed to Assyria's power. Disguised as an offer not to be refused by the leaders of Judah, the Assyrian envoy uses all sorts of seductive tactics to "peaceably" win over King Hezekiah and his elite. With silver-tongued promises of ample

fresh foods, and even the assurance that the God of Judah is backing this endeavor, Hezekiah is forced to make a choice on behalf of his people.

Recognizing the temptation for what it is, he calls upon his leadership to don sackcloth and ashes and repent for whatever is causing this judgment upon them.

Instead of reacting out of bravado, greed, or even fear, the king chooses humility.

This discerned action is the crux of the story. Instead of choosing to trust only in himself or his advisors, or his perceived might, Hezekiah chose to seek the counsel of the prophet Isaiah. In other words, he gave himself the space and time to seek, to the best of his ability, the will of God. Not his own will and judgment, but the will of God.

In this instance, as it is so often the case, God's words through the prophet were: "Do not be afraid." "Do not be afraid." Do we need to hear it one more time? "Do not be afraid?"

Additionally the counsel of the Almighty was,

Do not cave into your worst instincts.

Stay as you are.

I am at work.

The community heeded God's words, and the threat dissolved.

This past Tuesday, the Interim Governing Council met to discuss our upcoming congregational votes. Most of us assumed that the process would go quickly. However, an important and unresolved matter was brought before the council that affected our deliberations; particularly about the Consolidation Agreements, dissolving the two churches into one according to the State of Ohio.

The lingering question had to do with the delayed sale of the Faith Church property. I need not get into the logistics of the delay. However, the opportunity arose for the council to discuss the decision the Faith congregation made last May to be the body that would determine how the proceeds from the sale of the Richmond Road property would be disbursed? The relevant part of the discussion was, “If we consolidate into Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church by January 1, 2023, and the property is sold after that date (as it likely will be), who would be empowered to vote on how those funds are distributed, since the entity of Faith United Church of Christ would no longer exist?”

At its face value, and in the minds of most people from the LCPC side of the family, there was a question as to why it would matter? The understanding is that the majority of the disbursement would come to the new church.

However, what was news to some in the room, was that the Faith Community intended to contribute a portion of the sale to the Living Water Association Ohio Northeast (LWAONE), as well as a potential portion going to the Richmond Heights City Schools.

From the outset of this process, it was assumed that the sale of the property on Richmond Road would have occurred well before now and that the percentage or dollar amount to be awarded to one or both of those entities would have been determined by the Faith congregation. The delay in the sale put the disbursement decision on the back burner, with everything else we've been working on taking precedence. But with the consolidation agreements looming, this piece of unfinished business was pushed to the fore. For those who didn't know the full picture, confusion ushered us into the lesser healthy places inside us.

For LCPC folks, a couple of flags went up:

- Wait, we assumed all the proceeds from the sale of the property were coming to the new church.
- What of these proposed carve-outs to the LWAONE and Richmond Heights Schools?
- And, if we understand the need to determine what will be dispersed respectively to each entity, why do the Faith folks feel

like they need to take a vote apart from us? We are becoming one community after all!

Hear me, people. When we feel like something is amiss in the process, or like the rules of the game have been changed, we are wont to go to an anxious place; a reactionary place.

It's not right or wrong, it is human nature. And it invites us to introspectively discern how we will respond.

This situation became for us an opportunity for transparency with one another. Are we doing okay?

What Gene has helped me see is that this situation has less to do with trust. It is mostly about loss. It is so difficult for the LCPC side of the family to understand just how much was lost when our siblings from Faith left the building and grounds at 575 Richmond Rd and came to this space. We are still trying to recognize that the things that happened within this space before we joined together, that have continued, can be trigger points for what was left behind at Faith.

The capacity for the folks of Faith to make the ultimate decision about the assets from the sale is a critical act of autonomy that will assist in the process of letting go of that sacred space.

There are nuances to that determination that we, who have not spent the past 50+ years on that site, in that community, with those

critical partners, do not understand. And at this point, it IS an issue of trust and practiced vulnerability to let go of our reactions to this process and move forward with grace as our guide.

Once again, the counsel of the Almighty:

Do not be afraid.

Do not cave into your worst instincts.

Stay as you are.

I am at work.

This is a speed bump.

Perhaps it is a test of our resolve to choose the way of peace and eschew the way of distrust.

After our discussion the other night, I asked the council to reflect on the manner in which we held our discussion. We noticed that with the curveball thrown at all of us, we discussed, we asked good questions, we listened, we even laughed, and we delayed any quick decision.

In short, we followed the way of King Hezekiah. We offered no knee jerk reaction. We are taking the time to listen for the will of God, and to act on what's best for the whole body.

In just a few minutes, each congregation will vote to adopt the Constitution that will guide our consolidated congregation, when the time comes for us to adopt that resolution.

Let us recognize, that

Right now, God is at work forming us into a blessed body.

Right now, God is stirring within each of us as we discern our participation in this blessed body.

Right now, calls are going out to gift-laden members of the new congregation inviting you to serve in a variety of leadership roles.

Right now, God is at work amidst the process of seeking a prospective buyer for the Richmond Road property.

Right now, God is inviting us to embrace the light that we can be to each other and for the community around us.

Right now, God is reminding us to bring our emotional weapons to this altar and transform them into instruments of life. Instead of using a sword to tear, we choose to sow, turning this rocky ground into fertile soil for growth. The ground we are laying now, is that which will produce all manner of fruits of the Spirit.

I will close with a portion of a prayer written by Sister Joan Chittister, entitled *Prayer for Conscience and Courage*:

Loving God,
lead us beyond ourselves
to care and protect,
to nourish and shape,
to challenge and energize
~~both~~ the life(, the church) and the world
You have given us.

God of light and God of darkness,
God of conscience and God of courage
lead us through this time
of ~~spiritual~~ confusion and ~~public~~ uncertainty.

Lead us beyond fear, apathy and defensiveness
to new hope in You and to hearts full of faith.

Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church, let us claim abundant life,
walking by the light of God. Amen.