

“Using This New Beginning”
August 25, 2024

Isaiah 43:18-21
I John 3:2-3

Back in July—and, gosh, that seems such a long time ago!—Minnesota Governor and Democratic Vice-Presidential candidate, Tim Walz, said that his Republican opponents were “just weird.” And apparently, that stuck.

This bothered the former President enough that recently, with a grade-schooler’s eloquence, Donald Trump said that they’re not weird, “He’s weird.”

All of this led to comedian John Oliver advising the Republicans that if they don’t want to be called “weird,” “Stop being so...weird.” (Oliver’s advice was, actually, a little more strongly worded, but this is a worship service.)

All of this leaves me thinking: “You say ‘weird’ like it’s a bad thing.”

I mean, when did this happen?

Portland’s unofficial motto is “Keep Portland Weird.”

Those words have been appropriated by other cities, including our own. You can still find “Keep Iowa City Weird” merchandise around town. The museums across the street on the Pentecrest have a podcast affectionately called “Museum Weird.”

Let’s remember: the English word “weird” has its origin in the German word *werden*—meaning “to become.” Whenever there is a period of becoming, a period of change, there is a sense of “weirdness.”

Presidential candidates aside, maybe there’s something good about being weird.

If you’re new to town, I hope that you’re finding this place a little weird—but in a good way. It’s a place that doesn’t stay the same—and neither do those of us living here. It’s a place that challenges us and creates and calls forth new things in us.

If you’ve recently returned after the summer, I hope you’ll get busy doing your part once more to make Iowa City weird—becoming new people, finding new possibilities.

Student or not, we can all find some encouragement for these days as we meet here at the corner of Jefferson and Clinton, in this weird, old Congregational Church.

We are people and a congregation in process—changing as the world around us change and, we hope, doing our part to the change the world as well. We are becoming new people, a new congregation in the midst of all the challenges and opportunities that are coming to us in these days.

As a congregation, then, we are bold and courageous in seeking justice, in loving kindness, and in showing mercy, because the God who is not contained is the God who is present for us in all the places of our lives.

It is, I think, a matter of expectancy—of putting ourselves in those places where God might be encountered: places of prayer, places of action, places where simple human decency might be shown to our neighbors, known and unknown, places that give free reign to the imagination and to the creation of beauty, places of exacting science and open exploration of truth.

At Congregational UCC we maintain an open and receptive spirit. This is our tradition. We seek to be open to the new ways that God works among us. We are grateful for the past that we have. But we do not live in that past. We are not captive to what was or even to what is.

We recall the words of God spoken through the prophet: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing.”

It’s weird.

And it’s good.

And we find ourselves as people who seek to see understand the new things that are springing forth around us even now.

There is, of course, a challenge presented by change.

More than a half century ago Alvin Toffler wrote about “future shock”—being subjected to too much change in too short a time. In the decades that followed, we’ve become well acquainted with the shattering stress and disorientation of that experience. When our capacity to absorb the new is exceeded, we display symptoms ranging from irritation to blame. You can see that in our politics, in our families, in our city, in our schools, in our lives.

“Future shock” is nothing new. And it is very much with us.

The confounding thing about the future is that it keeps coming at us, whether we like it or not.

Time moves on.

Life moves on

The direction of time is always forward. Physicists haven’t quite figured out *why* we can only go in one direction and we can’t freeze ourselves in one instant of time. While the physicists might not understand this, in faith we recognize that all time is in God’s hands.

So, too, our personal lives and our life together as a congregation and, really, the life of the world are all in God’s hands. Life doesn’t stand still. It just keeps moving forward. We can’t stay where we are. And we certainly “New occasions teach new duties. Time makes ancient good uncouth.” God will not be frozen. The action of God’s Spirit among us will not be restricted.

As much as any time in recent memory, we find that we are people in process.

The author of I John put it this way: “Beloved, we are God’s children now: what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: When God is revealed, we will be like God, for we will see God as God is.” (I John 3:2) We are God’s children now—I like that. God knows what we will become. We discover that as we move forward. We discover that through the choices we make, the actions we take.

These are words about transformation—about becoming something—or someone—new.

To claim such a status might seem arrogant to some, might seem unrealistic to others. But the author of this letter sees it as an accurate description of who we are.

There is an ambiguous quality about our status as children of God. It is an actual state, but, as yet, it is veiled. It is realized, but not fully. This description is more than confusing religious language, however. It tells us who we are and reflects much of what we know from the world.

We are children of God by the love God has given us.

We are children of God with all of our imperfections, all of our anger and fear and doubt, all of our sin.

What we will be is not yet known, but we have faith that *somehow* we are becoming more like Christ. This is reflected in the short prayer: “Creation’s Lord, we give you thanks that your work is incomplete; that we are in the making still.”

Given our changing, becoming—weird—nature,

we need a place to be nurtured,

we need a place to grow,

we need a place to discover more of who we are,

we need a place to live out our identity.

So we are drawn to the church—the place where we are nurtured in our faith, the place that sends us out to show the love of God. That is why you came here today, isn’t it? Maybe you’ve been doing this for decades. Maybe this is simply your first, second, or third time here. But you came here to be nurtured and challenged so that you might be more effective in the world.

There are some words often attributed to Desmond Tutu, but were perhaps first said by St. Augustine: “Without us, God cannot.”

God does not feed the hungry or elect leaders or comfort the afflicted or bring peace in the midst of conflict. You are needed out beyond our walls to show and tell the good news of God’s love. You are needed to stand up for what is right when others won’t. Maybe you’ll do some of the

things we already do: feeding the hungry, siding with the poor. I hope you will find your own ways of being faithful and tell us about them.

Without us, without you, God cannot.

That is only half of the message, however. The complete quotation says: “With us, God cannot. Without *God, we* cannot.”

Without restoring yourself in the worship of God, you will soon grow weary and the enthusiasm of the fall will quickly fade. Without learning the way of prayer with others you will soon burn out. Without gaining insight into the ways of God through study with others, you cannot do the work that so desperately needs to be done. When we are at our best, this congregation is a place of renewal. Here you will find rest and welcome. Here we find the strength that sustains us in the weird times of beginning and becoming.

There is work to be done—not only the immediate tasks at hand this week, but the work that we have in this place, this world in the years ahead. Doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly with our God.

In these days, we might see ourselves as a *community of becoming*. We can’t offer a neat solution to every problem. But we can offer a vision of grace and compassion in controversy. And that is sorely needed in our nation. Often we regard all of the divisions that exist in our nation as an affliction; often they are. Created in God’s image, we have seen that image broken in every conceivable way. We have seen human welfare considered apart from nature’s welfare. We have seen public morality separated from private morality. And as one person put it, we have seen social justice held aloof from economic justice.

Against this fragmentation, we offer the vision of resurrection, a vision of our human condition as wounded but gloriously whole. We can speak of resurrection, of God’s power to bring life out of death, health out of decay. We affirm that there is a power that can still bring new life to our lives, and to our community, our nation, and our world.

And so, in these days, we do not loose heart. As weird as it seems, God is doing a new thing and we are becoming a new creation. We are called to announce that good can come out of evil, life out of death, light out of shadows, new growth from decay.

Even in these weird times, we have the love and support of one another. Even as our world is becoming something new, so we too are being made a new creation in Christ.

These are weird days. God knows what we will become. We will find out together.