

“What’s the Buzz?”

A, Pentecost 20; 10:00 am

I Thessalonians 1:1-10; October 22, 2017

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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Holy Spirit may you be in my words and in the space between my words that all who are present here today might hear your word that dwells deep within each and every one of us. Amen

I. WHAT’S THE BUZZ?

What’s the buzz? About this church in Buena Vista? About you, me, brothers and sisters in Christ?! If Paul were writing to *us*, today, right here and now, what would he say?

²⁻⁵ Every time we think of you, CUCC, we thank God for you. Day and night you’re in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following our Master, Jesus Christ, before God our Father. It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you *very* much but also has put his hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn’t just words. Something happened in you! The Holy Spirit put depth and breadth of understanding into your convictions.

⁷⁻¹⁰ Do you know that all over the counties of Chaffee and Lake, Fremont and El Paso, spiritual seekers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are *echoing* Jesus

Christ, not only in Colorado, but all over the place. The news of your faith in God is out.

We don’t even have to say anything anymore—*you’re* the message! People come up and tell us how you received us with open arms, how you deserted the dead idols of your old life so you could embrace and serve God, the true, all-loving, still-speaking God.

II. WHOM DO WE IMITATE? HOW?

What’s the buzz? What’s the call upon our lives? To be “imitators of Christ.”

But, what does that *mean*? Is it simply asking ourselves, “What Would Jesus Do” (WWJD) in any given situation?

Sometimes. But other sometimes, it’s just not that simple. We might have to delve a little deeper, embrace the complexities, probe the nuances. We have to search the spirits and seek the Holy Spirit’s wisdom to broaden our understanding of what exactly we’re to do when “imitating Christ.”

For even Jesus Christ, when he walked on earth, teaching and preaching, showing us the way, was complex and not ever simply black and white!

Love your neighbor, yourself, God, your enemies. Turn the other cheek, but *also* speak truth and love to power; turn over tables in the Temple when necessary! Call a spade a spade, tell the Pharisees

when they're being a brood of vipers, while *also* welcoming and cradling the children in your arms—all the little children, red and yellow, black and white. Whew! How do you imitate all *that*, all at the same time?

Henri Nouwen offers this thought on how we, the church, imitate Christ:

“As Jesus was one human person among many, the Church is *one* organization among many. And just as there may have been people with more attractive appearances than Jesus, there may be many organizations that are a lot better run than the Church. (!) But Jesus is the Christ *appearing* among us to *reveal* God's love, and the Church is *his* people called together to make his presence visible in today's world.

Rev. Richard Floyd, in “Our Blessed Guides” suggests that we have many saints and guides around us, young and old, to give us a hint on the way to imitating Christ.

"Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God." - 3 John 11

Floyd says: “Our culture prizes originality. No one wants to be considered an imitation! But in a number of places in the Bible we are admonished to model ourselves after someone or something, either a person or an ideal.

It makes sense if you think about it. None of us is born

fully formed; we are constantly being shaped by the world around us.

As I write this I am babysitting my 9 month-old granddaughter. Her most salient attribute is her curiosity. Every moment she is taking it all in; wide-eyed she watches everything around her.

She will learn about the world from others, primarily her parents, but also from other family members, from teachers at school and people at church.

This is how we all learn and grow at whatever age. Our moral character is largely determined over time by what we **choose to imitate** and what we choose **not** to imitate.

And it reassures me to know that I don't have to make up my moral world from scratch; to realize that there are reliable **guides and blueprints** for living well.

Some of these guides are in books, but the most important ones are the ones we have known in person.

I invite you to take a few moments to recall in your mind's eye the people who have had the most **influence** on who you have become. What did you learn from them? What about them did you imitate? Then thank God for them! For all the faithful guides God has given us to imitate.

III. WHAT WOULD PAUL PREACH TO US?

So, now. We've considered for a moment what Paul might write to us as a congregation, in the newly-discovered "Letter to the Buenavistians" an Epistle to the Church at Buena Vista."

We've realized that we shouldn't get a big head about the *praise*, because "imitating Christ" and being faithful in ministry may not be quite as simple and clear-cut as we first thought.

We've considered suggestions from various guides about where we might look for guidance on this journey of Christ imitation.

Where do we go from *here*? What is the message to be preached *this* morning? For we are in this sermon together, you and I, as all sermons are, or should be—dialogue and exploration together with spoken word and heard understanding—preacher, congregation, Holy Spirit, eyes, ears, hearts, message coming out of us and into our life of faith.

Anthony Robinson offers a little provoking perspective on the purpose of our "Sunday sermons." He starts with Garrison Keillor, who quipped: "*I've heard a lot of sermons in the past ten years that make me want to get up and walk out!*"

"They're secular, psychological, self-help sermons. Friendly, but of no use. They didn't make you straighten up. They didn't give you anything hard."

Robinson adds:

At least sometimes we *do* need to hear a "hard word," a word that names our failures and self-deceptions, a word that causes us to straighten up and do better. Some speak of this experience as being "convicted," which seems to be a way of saying, "You were talking about *me*, preacher. You got my number."

Of course, sometimes preachers just catch a case of the common scold. Scolding people isn't the same thing, at all, as proclaiming the hard word of God. No good.

The difference is that the preacher too stands under God's word, called to account by this word of judgment and grace along with everyone else.

Saying "God loves you," over and over and over, though it may be true, can dull our spiritual edge. Every now and again, we also need to hear, "God loves you *so much* that God expects something better of you." That too can be good news."

Hmmm...

Sermons should remind us without a doubt that God loves us *and* we are first and foremost beloved children of God. AND, they should challenge us to be more of that.

And, that challenge is to *us* as individuals and also in community. What if the word we need to hear today is precisely *that*: Both/*and*. What if our challenge—along with the glowing praise mentioned above— is

that we tend to get stuck in the “OR” around here sometimes.

Wrapped up in the “versus”—and I don’t mean Bible verses!

(Though, we *should* get buried in the bible verses a little more—like *this* one: “Be imitators of Christ!”

V. POLARITIES:

Last week Helen Duncan and I participated on behalf of our church at a RMC leadership event called IGNITE.

We were introduced to many helpful concepts and frameworks for understanding congregations and individual souls. One of the most helpful was that of “Polarities.”

Polarities are issues or tendencies that exist in communities, a kind of spectrum or “scale”. They need to be balanced, understood, and all aspects seen as having merit without dividing into camps.

Some polarities that are often at work in churches are: (and as I list these, think about whether we most often insert an OR between the poles, or the AND.)

- +Tradition and Innovation,
- +Spiritual health and Institutional health,
- +Management and Leadership,
- +Strong Clergy Leadership and Strong Lay Leadership,

+Inreach and Outreach,

+Nurture and Transformation,

+Easy Process and Challenging Process in making Disciples,

+Call and Duty.

Before we delve into that any further, here’s a little s a humorous look at our tendency as humans to either/or a lot—both in church and our everyday lives.

False Dichotomies

Let me ask you a few questions that I am sure you can answer, he says:

Did you put on shoes this morning, or did you come to church in a car?

Do you eat cereal for breakfast, or don't you like football?

Are you Lutheran, or do you live in America?

Will you obey God, or will you pay taxes to Caesar?

Welcome to the world of false dichotomies-thing that are wrongly set against each other, "either/or"s that really aren't. Can you wear shoes and come to church in a car? Can you eat cereal and enjoy football? Can you be Lutheran and live in America?

Of course; in fact, you can be an American Lutheran who wears shoes and eats cereal while enjoying football after you've traveled to and from church in a car. None of these things are mutually exclusive. Beware of the one who asks such questions, because there may well be an agenda

behind them. At the same time, rejoice! Such scheming is no match for the crucified and risen Christ.
(Tim Pauls, *Your Two-Kingdom Life*)

VI. CUCC POLARITIES TO BE MANAGED

So, as we look around *our* church and community, here are a few places we might observe polarities that are healthy and being explored and managed, with a solid AND in the middle. We can so easily fall into the Or or the versus, but we keep finding a way to manifest the “And.”

*Contemporary and Traditional: worship styles and music; programs and practices. Learning new songs and styles while remembering and carrying forward the familiar.

*Pastoral Care for our own *and* reaching out beyond our church family to tend, care, visit and support. That care is carried out by our pastors *and* many others in our communion of saints.

*All-Church Bazaar: something we do for ourselves *and* as community outreach and mission giving. Older folks and younger, working together.

*Offering Plates: we give resources for the work of our church *and* special offerings and disaster response and all sorts of “outgiving.”

*Who are the people in this place: We grieve and honor those we have lost and miss dearly, *and*

welcome and embrace those coming in as new and honored guests and participants.

*Resources and Budget: A big deficit *and* hope! Scarcity *and* generosity. God and God’s people have been faithful in the past—especially in this Autumn season of the year. Hope abounds that untold surprises await us from unexpected sources.

*Service in Action: Using our physical strength and stamina to work here at church on the grounds, garden, roof, fence, lawn, snow-shoveling, *and* pitching-in when a moving truck needs unloaded for a new friend among us. Or, when a Habitat house needs building, people need to be fed and housed, and others need release from human trafficking, and to be marched and vouched for.

*Fences and Neighbors: Speaking of fences, polarities were managed, with the help of the Holy Spirit just this week as healthy boundaries, stewardship and protection of property *and* healthy dialogue, listening, and new understanding and welcome happened right here in our neighborhood circle.

*Action *and* contemplation. Like Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama teach us: Praying for the world, strengthening our own spirit in quiet and meditation, *and* going out and changing the world—must happen hand in hand, not as an either/or.

This is like Jesus, too! Jesus was teaching and preaching, healing and feeding, day in and day out,

but also sailing off in a boat to the other side of the lake for quiet, soul-rest, and connecting with his Source in prayer.

*Messages and Stories from the pulpit from our own clergy leadership *and* laypersons from inside and outside our church family.

*Communication: We investing ourselves in the life of the church when we ask good questions: gain clarity *and* find new understanding of one another, why decisions were made, and hear one another's hearts.

VII. LOOK FOR THE AND!

Those are just *some* of the polarities in the church in general, and some in our own place, in specific. Ways we have witnessed to manage and even *overcome* polarities, so that we and God can be about what God is already doing and still wants to do moreso in our midst.

What about you? In your own life, in your personal journey? Where are the polarities that threaten to be polar opposites, but could be managed with new eyes and brought closer together? Where is there an "AND" to be found instead of an OR or a VERSUS or a tug of war in your heart, in your life, in your own home?

Let's endeavor to "look for the AND." This week. Next week. In this Liturgical Season of Bazaar, then Thanksgiving, and then Advent!

Look right now at your bulletin. Look right there, in

the prayers we began our worship today with:

Celebrate God's love. Forgiveness, encouragement, support, and healing are gifts of God to us.

Reach out and care for those around you.

We will be people of peace, mercy and compassion.

Our hearts are filled with your joy and peace.

You have placed your imprint on us and challenged us to be your people in thought, word and deed.

In gratitude we come to you this day, bringing shouts of joy as well as cries of sorrow. (Joys and Concerns!)

We thank you for your never-ending Presence and all our blessings. Help us to bring words of healing and hope to all we meet, for it is in Jesus' name that we pray.

VIII. WHAT'S THE BUZZ?!

So, what's the buzz? About us and our faith journey?

²⁻⁵ Every time we think of you, we thank God for you. Day and night you're in our prayers as we call to mind your work of faith, your labor of love, and your patience of hope in following Jesus Christ. It is clear, that God not only loves you very much but *also* has put his hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached came to you, it wasn't just words. Something happened in *you*. The

Holy Spirit put depth **and** breadth of understanding
into your convictions.

You, we, all of us, are ones who look for the AND. And look to Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. You imitate Christ, and you lean on the everlasting arms of Jesus for the most sure foundation you can find. Let us sing our story! And.....let us stand as we sing and join together. Amen. “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms” #496