

Into the Future Together
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Acts 18:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

One of the more prominent voices in the larger church right now is a Lutheran Pastor named Nadia Bolz-Weber. Nadia defies all church pastor stereotypes. She is all sleeved out with tattoos, and she curses... quite a lot. In her earlier years, Nadia's life was controlled by alcohol and drug abuse. Her story, which you can learn more about from her website sarcasticlutheran.com or her many published works, is one of death and resurrection. She talks about how God continually reaches into the graves of our lives and brings us back to life.

After a career as a stand-up comic, Nadia discerned a call to be a "pastor to her people," to create a church that serves those who have lived through struggles like hers. So, she started one called House for all Sinners and Saints in downtown Denver. People LOVE this church. It is known to be a place for imperfections, where judgement is minimal. I've been told by friends who have visited, that it is a beautiful expression of authentic Christian community.

Nadia is the rare pastor who can have a national profile and not make the church all about her. And there's something she tells people when they start attending regularly, when they are ready to become members. It's almost a community motto. She tells people, "we will disappoint you."

We are the church: we will disappoint you.

I like the honesty of her statement, because I think it is both funny and true. I hear a couple things in it. For one, I hear encouragement to remember that the church is first and foremost - a human community. The church should be a place where we experience unconditional acceptance. The church should be a place where we don't have to work so hard to pretend that everything is perfect when it is not. That is God reaching into our graves to meet us. We are still human and we will act out of our wounds and brokenness. This will cause pain, frustration and suffering, even in a church like ours.

So, if I've never been quite as direct with you as Nadia is with her church folk, let me go on record to say: We will disappoint you. And, yet God is here doing amazing things at the same time. Here at MCC, whenever there is new energy or a new direction or some conflict bubbles up, or someone isn't behaving or there's a fight at a meeting, someone will say to me, "this shouldn't happen in a church. Shouldn't this be a conflict free zone?" My response is, "Well, the church is just made up of people... fully human, often flawed." Stress has a way of bringing out our humanness.

And you know what? That's nothing new. Take the church in Corinth, for example. We are told that the Apostle Paul started this little house church at his good friend's Aquila & Priscilla's house. Once the community was off and running, he left to go start another church. As soon as Paul leaves town, the church starts to pull apart at the seams. There are fights, divisions, power struggles and turf battles. The fight is so ugly that Paul sits down to write a letter, another opportunity for him to be a pen-pal pastor.

Here's one thing I've learned again in this time of physical separation: We often expect ourselves to be able to do it all. And sometimes, that expectation we hold for ourselves has a way of spilling out into our relationships with other people. So we hold other people to unrealistic expectations too.

I know this is a time of difficulty for many of us. We need each other to be whole, but we can't be physically together yet. We know that we are better together because no one has all the gifts on their own. Paul's words remind us today to look for the talents that everyone has to offer, and to try and extend to others (and ourselves) a little grace.

Why does practicing faith as a church, as a community of people, even matter? As the church, we practice making space for our brokenness and our woundedness. We practice being honest about human nature. We practice remembering that we all have unique gifts to share, and we need one another.

Then we carry that grace with us as we live with our families and relate to our friends. We carry that grace with us into our workplaces. We carry that grace into our civic engagements. Don't we need to remember as we are living with one another that we are human, that we all have gifts to share, that we need one another?

A few years ago, there was a news story about a young boy from a small town in South Dakota who wandered away from home. Once his parents discovered he was missing, they began a frantic search. After a couple of hours, they called the police who joined the hunt. Soon there were neighbors, Boy Scouts and other townspeople looking for the child.

Through the afternoon and into the night hundreds of people combed the prairie hoping to find the boy before the harsh elements overcame him. At sunrise the next morning, they resumed the search, but there was still no sign of him. They felt as if he had just vanished.

Then, one of the searchers said, "Let's get together in one long line. We will join hands and sweep up and down the prairie until we find him." They formed a line a quarter of a mile long. I'm sure it was an amazing sight to see that long line moving across the prairie holding hands.

On the third sweep, they found the boy lying in a small ditch behind some brush. He was not moving. A paramedic jumped into action and found a pulse. The boy began to stir. He was dehydrated and disoriented, but he was alive.

They carried the boy back to his parents who could not believe their good fortune. The mother started hugging everyone and asked, "How did you find him?" And a man standing nearby said,

“Honestly, we never would have found him in time, if we hadn’t joined hands and walked together.” That is our challenge as a church. Not to think alike or to express our faith in the same manner, but despite our differences, to join hands and move into the future together. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.