

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
July 22, 2012
Community Reformed Church of Colonie, NY

FROM “THEY” TO “WE”
Ephesians 2:11-22

The vision that Paul describes, of a diverse, inclusive community in which all people are cared for and through which God works in the world, is what we are all called to as Church. Those who find their home in God’s household are called to be a welcoming community in which all people can find a home, a place to belong and a connection with God through the Spirit.

When I was at the Festival of Homiletics in May, I decided to attend a worship service led by Nadia Bolz-Weber. I chose to attend this service because Nadia is a leading voice in what is known as the Emergent Church Movement. Since I was only minimally familiar with this movement, I thought I should attend.

It turns out that Nadia Bolz-Weber is the founding pastor of a church in Denver, Colorado that describes itself in this way: “ ‘House for All Sinners and Saints’ is a group of folks figuring out how to be a liturgical, Christo-centric, social justice oriented, queer inclusive, incarnational, contemplative, irreverent, ancient-future church with a progressive but deeply rooted theological imagination.”

Nadia is a tall, dark haired, somewhat severe looking woman in her thirties. She was dressed entirely in black. Her most notable feature, I would have to say, is that both of her arms, her neck and what I could see of her back were covered with tattoos. So, when she first stepped into the pulpit, my judgmental side kicked in and I wondered just exactly what I had gotten myself into. That thought disappeared the moment she started to preach. She was brilliant.

During her sermon she told this story, which in light of our journey to become a “Room for All” congregation these past few years, I found extremely relevant.

She explained that some congregations might fear edgy, marginalized people such as drag queens, homeless folks, gay couples, immigrants, transgender individuals, etc... but not House for All Sinners and Saints. It was founded to accommodate these edgy, marginalized types. But last summer at her church, for some reason, middle aged, middle class people were driving in from the suburbs to attend church at House... People who were wearing Dockers and who would eat at Appleby’s! And she didn’t understand why they were coming. After all, they were a DIY kind of church... they made art and sang acapella... and sat in the round... and she was beginning to resent that her precious little indy boutique kind of church was turning into a 7-11... And she was terrified that the more edgy marginalized people that they’d always attracted would come and see a bunch of people who looked like their parents and think, “Yeah, that’s not for me.”

So she called a church meeting for the congregation to talk about the growth and demographic change at House with the hopes that if the people who had been around House from the beginning just said who they were and what the church had always been about then the new people who “really didn’t belong there” would self select out realizing that it’s not really meant for them. And even while she was planning it, it felt **bad**. She had a revelation: It’s both difficult and painful to be a pastor when you’re not really that good of a Christian.

Luckily, before they were able to have that stupid idea of a meeting, the plan changed. The plan changed because she underwent what can only be described as a spiritual heart transplant. That is what the prophet Ezekiel describes when God said to him “I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” Though she said, it did not feel like a removal.

Removal is far too pleasant a word. Her heart was ripped out. Without anesthesia, or a sterile environment, God reached in and ripped out her heart of stone and replaced it again with a heart of flesh. She confessed that as often as that particular procedure had happened to her, one would think that she'd have a zip lock installed or something. But apparently that's was not an option.

The heart transplant happened when she called her friend Russell who she thought would sympathize with her. But Russell refused to cooperate. "Yeah, that Sucks," he said. "You guys are really good at welcoming the stranger... when the stranger is a young transgender kid. But sometimes the stranger looks like your Mom and Dad."

She wanted to say, "You're supposed to be my friend." But she couldn't because she realized that Russell had spoken the truth and the truth was setting her free. And she realized that it was the work of the Holy Spirit.

So when the meeting day finally arrived, she knew what needed to happen. The new folks with the Dockers and the Appleby's breath needed to tell them who they were and why they were there... so that the young edgy marginalized folks with the tattoos who had been around since the beginning could hear what the church was actually about. Not only that, she felt she had to suck it up and tell them that horrible thing that Russell had said to her about welcoming your parents!!!

And then Asher spoke up, "As a young transgender kid, who was welcomed into this community, I just want to go on the record as saying that I'm really glad that there are people who look like my parents at church now, because I have a relationship with them and they have a relationship with me and they love me and care for me in a way that my Mom and Dad don't.

There they all were, she said. "Flawed, smug, confused, embarrassed, embarrassing. In other words, the very people to whom God sends the Spirit to snatch out our hearts of stone and replace them with God's own (heart)." **Sooner or later, the Holy Spirit forces us to invite in the people we're trying to avoid!** If you hear nothing else this morning, I would like you to hear what I just said: **Sooner or later, the Holy Spirit forces us to invite in the people we're trying to avoid!**

Nadia concluded her story with these words which I thought were profound: "The radical and mysterious and dangerous thing the Spirit does has always been to form us into the body of Christ... sometimes despite us, sometimes against us, but always for us, because it is only the Spirit who can transform us from a "they" into a "we."