

“Good Life Guides” Sermon 2/16/2014

by Julie Lombard

When times get tough and the economy tanks, our country turns to Super Heroes to save the day. Both Superman and Batman were created during the great depression during a time when trust in the government decreased and an anxious society could beat back its enemies with fantastic heroes. Where are those heroes when we need them? How might I contact them for help?

Today I want to tell you a story, the story of a strategic process. Before you get all, “Oh boy, this is going to be a real snoozer,” I want you to know that this is also a love story. See if you can see what I mean; it tells of the search for the good life.

Ron Heifetz is an author who writes about Adaptive Leadership. He believes a technical change addresses problems where the answers are within easy reach while adaptive change is a whole new situation which requires charting a new course. Albert Einstein said, “No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew.” Nick Carter, the President of my theological school, would agree with these wise men.

Two years ago, Margaret Weis, who preached here on February 2nd, and I sat together in a class taught by Pres. Carter called, “Where are we going and how do we get there from here?” It was a course in Strategic Planning for religious and non-profit organizations. This is the same professor who taught, “Show me the money!” He believes that people don’t choose churches because of faith, but rather because they desire to be in a community. I know this to be true because a card carrying atheist from this church recently told me that very same thing.

Appreciative inquiry is the act of asking questions in a strategic process; it recognizes the best in people, and perceives those things that give life to a living system. Leap of Faith, the denominational program in which this church is involved, is a process designed to help this church to know better who it is and it provides an opportunity for us to explore our own culture.

Heifetz would say that strategic planning is a good time to get “on the balcony,” to distance our egos and be the objective observer while asking, “What’s going on here?” This is a time to do an environment scan and/or a needs assessment. It’s also a time for collecting assumptions because strategic planning is built on a foundation of assumptions-- what is the culture here? How do we welcome new comers?

Often it is the new comers or our visitors who are more aware of the patterns within the culture. A fish doesn't recognize the water in which it swims. Understanding the congregational culture is an important part of planning. It's vital to name the established ways of life and determine what might get disrupted by change. When studying the culture, we look at the people, their rituals, artifacts, stories, symbols, and theologies. You can find answers by looking at the financial information-- what is the story being told through the budget? How do you spend money? What are the congregation's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats?

In this search, uncovered are shared core values. These are what make up the characteristics of the community. Core values are traits deeply held, enduring, timeless, and independent of fads. They ask, "Where do we stand?" Martin Luther King once said "Our ultimate measure is not where we stand in times of comfort and convenience, but where we stand in times of challenge and controversy." Our core values underlie the work and service we do. They clarify who we are and when a strategic plan fails, it is because we forget to focus on who we are and what we value.

The most important component is a clear statement of the reasons for the organization's existence, its purpose, and how it intends to fulfill that purpose. What I am talking about is the Mission Statement. Your mission statement is; ***UUCH is a faith community transforming lives and the world.*** According to Nick Carter, a good mission statement is brief, concise, and memorable. It appears you've hit the mark. Is that why you are here, to transform lives and the world? How many of you feel this statement is accurate?

Here are a two other short and sweet mission statements; from Facebook we get ***to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected*** and from Google we find ***to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful.*** This envisioning is a spiritual exercise and leads to forming a vision statement which is a word-picture of the promised land you intent to arrive at someday. This vision aligns the people across the organization; it facilitates goal setting and planning, and embodies the core values. A goal is a general aim and every goal has an implied value. They are the things that would be true if your vision was realized. Goals are broad, they show your general intention, and they are intangible and abstract. An example of a goal could be ***"We will grow our congregation by 25% in the next ten years."***

Where can you find your mission statement or your values, and how are they being communicated? This question points to the art of branding and reflects the heart and mind connection we want to have with our target audience. If we want to grow, we have to attract those we want to join us. Branding is a means to do it. Branding increases the value of the

organization and ensures what we stand for is in line with what our newcomers are seeking. Branding means you're in it for the long haul, it taps into the deeper emotions, it's consistent, it's relevant, and it tells your story. You can find this story everywhere you look; on the front of your order of service, on your website, on your publications such as the Facebook page or your newsletter; it's embedded in your very being and every action responds to it.

Recently members of the Leap of Faith teams gathered together to find four words that best capture us. They are branding words that speak to your collective core values; they are the goals you strive for here. They are; **Welcoming, Caring, Faith, and Community**. We can look at each of these words and ask: are we a welcoming bunch? Are we caring? How? As much fun as it might be to investigate these words individually, I like what happens when you string them together. They truly begin to tell your story; **you are a welcoming, caring faith community**.

I noticed that right away when I arrived. I am a newcomer that recognized that you are a welcoming, caring faith community. I wasn't the only one; my husband and children noticed it, too. My daughter's best friend noticed it. The search committee that came from the UU Church Manchester last year when Patrick McLaughlin preached here also saw it clearly. We are all fish from other oceans and we can see the water you swim in. By the way, that search committee you greatly impressed from Manchester really liked Patrick. He's now serving as their newly called minister and you helped make that process possible.

When my daughter was one year old, my family took a trip to Jamaica. It was the dead of winter when we stepped off the plane in the warm, humid air. Annie, with her limited toddler speech, captured the change that she felt. She said, **"Ahhhhh!"** She didn't need complicated ways to communicate what she felt. One simple sound summarized it and four words can summarize this church; **welcoming, caring, faith, community. It is who you are and it's what you do.**

There is no need to get frustrated like Flash in that slam poem I read earlier. If only he could use his strengths and powers to better the world. You don't have that problem. That parable is clever, but I also know that it's negative and not true. I know this because I watched Saturday morning cartoons as a child. Saturday mornings were dedicated to tune-time and Sunday's to church-time. It was a well balanced foundation where I constructed many of my values. One of the cartoons I watched was the Super Friends. All the Super Heroes lived and worked in the Hall of Justice. There was no one clear leader, Superman wasn't their Board Chair and Wonder Woman wasn't their Minister. Instead these heroes and sheroes co-habitated like a congregation, and saving the world was their shared ministry.

When trouble was on the horizon, the Super Friends didn't look to Superman to decide how to handle the concern. I didn't see Flash eating Doritos or Aquaman berating Flash for his poor eating habits. Superman didn't get all the good gigs and all the others weren't bent out of shape because they couldn't be the hero they dreamed of being. It wasn't a competition; they were in it together as a team to save the world. They knew their strengths and they used them to solve any problem. So, as much as I like my friend's slam poetry, it doesn't ring true for me as how I know the Super Friends tend to be.

Maybe just for fun, the poet got lost in negativity and missed who these Super Friends really are; they are a positive group that works well together to transform lives and the world. Those Super Friends have a lot in common with you. Maybe this church is a Hall of Justice? I have experienced you to be Super Friends working collaboratively together. I've seen you leave your egos behind, and your purpose is to do what is sustainable for the long haul. Your aim is to pass on those negative notions and accentuate the positive because you know that positive communities are attractive. You are a very attractive community because you are a **welcoming, caring faith community** that dreams it will transform lives and the world. I knew there was a good reason why I liked it here so much.

Beloved Community, my super friends, you are the heroes and sheroes. That's why I am here and it's what I want to learn. I'm not here to lead you, I'm not here to be some Wonder Woman, it's not about me or my ego; rather I am here to learn by being your curious observer. I want to discover how you do what you do. What would it be like if I learned that from you? What would it be like if I then went out into the world and shared that knowledge with another church? Do you believe in your impact, how you make the world a better place? Friends, **you are the good life guides**. Teach me, I want to learn, I want to serve, and I want to help create many more positive Halls of Justice just like yours. You have the power to transform lives and the world. You are clear on your aim and your purpose. Your culture is one that makes you a welcoming, caring faith community. **It's what you do.** May it be so. Amen.