

My Dream for the Stamford Church of Christ

By Brandon

The poet Walt Whitman once wrote, “Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes.” The human condition is interesting because we are apt to see contradiction in the world around us, inconsistency in the people around us, and attempt our best to project an image without fault or friction, all while living it a life which at its core is full of contradiction and hypocrisy. This is no judgment. What else would you expect? Here we stand; we can do no other. We would be better off, like Whitman, just accepting it.

I think of the constant criticism of the church as full of a bunch of hypocrites. Well, there is something to that criticism. They’re not wrong. But how should we respond? “Oh, yeah, let us fix that really quick” is not a realistic response. Of course, there is a kind of hypocrisy that is blind to its own hypocrisy, and that kind of contradiction truly is abhorrent and destructive. But the irony is that the only kind of hypocrisy that is evil is the kind of hypocrisy that cannot or refuses to see its hypocrisy. How can we see the beauty in others if the only beauty we see in ourselves is a misguided fantasy of a moral purity that doesn’t exist? How can we love others when we cannot love ourselves for who we actually are?

Loving ourselves and seeing the beauty in ourselves as we actually are is a lesson that is taking me too long to learn. My kids take Taekwondo classes, and I am grateful to God for the intimate care that their instructors give them. One phrase I overheard the other day, was the master exhorting the young children to “stop vibrating!” He was right in the immediate sense. They struggled to stay still, to focus and concentrate. So their bodies “vibrated” back and forth. Simone Weil echoes the Taekwondo master when she says, “Prayer consists in attention,” and in attention “the soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth.” We may apply this both to God and to those around us. IF we cannot stop ourselves from vibrating we cannot truly see our neighbor for who they are, nor will we be able to open ourselves to God as he makes himself known.

But at a certain level we cannot stop vibrating. We cannot stop contradicting. We cannot cover up the messes. We cannot work out the contradictions. At an elementary level we can become disciplined, attentive, and humble. We can be less of a jerk about things. We can lay off the car horn – both literal and metaphorical. But we are a hopeless bunch whose essence is found in that vibration that comes from the very breath of God’s word that roused us awake in the first place.

What applies to us individually, applies to us also collectively. My dream for the church is not to resolve all contradictions, but to learn to live with them, to accept ourselves for who we are, who we are not, and who we are yet to be. And to let that agitation propel us, by God’s grace, toward what is good. When we find ourselves in God’s grace our essential contradiction becomes a powerful lens to see the divine glory in the world.

The church is a contradiction. We are diverse and plural, often contradicting even one another. But we are held together by the grace of God in the humbling conviction that God loves us as we are. My prayer is that we drop the pomp and circumstance, the doctrinal statements, the tests of fellowship, and guises of moral respectability, so that whatever good and beauty and truth may

be found here can be a testimony to the goodness of our God and the primal loveliness of the creatures he has made. Do we contradict ourselves? Very well, we contradict ourselves. We are human beings caught in a thorny and complex struggle between good and evil in our heads and our hearts – and we contradict all of that mess by insisting that God loves us and insisting on doing what is good and kind and compassionate to others. That is the only kind of church that I can honestly belong to, and I'm glad to find it here in Stamford.

– Brandon Pierce

On the occasion of his September 17th
installment as the senior minister
of the Stamford Church of Christ
and as taken from that day's
Jubilee to Jubilation booklet.