

Welcome Home: Same Great Church, New Energy

Lake Street Church of Evanston

Rev. Michael Woolf

September 8, 2019

Welcome back. I remember the first time I was pastoring a church in New England, I had to get used to the rhythm of summer. I kept showing up to the office and to worship and no one came, or at least relatively few did. I was used to summer being pretty busy in church life, but there was a new rhythm at work. Then, I heard that there were churches that closed in New England for the summer. Now, that is next level. I am proud to say that we definitely did not close this summer, nor was there nobody here. We had a lot of conversations, tried some new worship ideas, and I think folks got to know me a little better. I wore short sleeves – that was fun. But summer just naturally has a different feel in church life than the church year, doesn't it? As we all go back to school, or settle in for a busy fall, there is a return to work and to the rhythm of slow application of effort that accretes over time.

And there will be plenty of things that are new, or that feel strange to you this year, because you've never been through a program year with me before, but I think you're going to like it, and I think there's going to be a lot to talk about. I think we will do church and I mean that in the most profound way possible. So, welcome home. It's the place you may have known for 50 years, but it's also new, and different, just the way all institutions are both new and not new.

And today for our readings from scripture we have two depictions of change. One seems on the surface of it be received pretty well – God explains that God is going to do a new thing in the world. Already it is springing forth, do you not perceive it? And God is the God of new things. God tells us in scripture that God is constantly making all things new. How different such a God appears from how the divine is represented in culture – resistant to change, unyielding, my way or the highway. Maybe we have confused God for how the church has normally worked, but churches too change and become new again.

And then there's change not so well received. So, I'll never forget going home to visit my folks after having been in Boston for a long time. I was out with a couple of friends, and I got something I had always feared – someone told me, “you're not from around here are you?” You see, you think I've got a thick accent, but it's probably about 1/10th of what it was. Nearly a decade in Boston slimmed it down and added a little less twang and slowness. I think I've migrated to North Carolina or Virginia by now, up the seaboard on average. And so my accent didn't match. I was different, and yet it was the same place it had always been, but I had changed in some outwardly visible way. Jesus also comes home and he's, well he's different. Look at the text. Where did he pick this stuff up? We knew the guy, but he's different, he's changed, and he's acting like he gets to teach us a thing or two, and they react poorly. They don't believe. And interestingly

this lack of belief means Jesus is limited and he gets out of town quick. Change happened, but people were not on board to receive it's life-giving qualities. They rejected it.

And so, here we are. Same place, but different. Different in large part because I'm here, I'm aware, but I think there's some energy here about a place that's been here for over 150 years, and yet it too can experience another spring, another growth of new leaves, another time in the sun. I believe in that very strongly. But change is still change, and so I want to invite you to be here and to be all in this year as we make something new together.

But we have to be on the same page on the new thing we're doing here, or we will go in a thousand different directions with it. I've been upfront that I think our community needs to engage our community more thoroughly through art, that we need to be seeking the most innovative and life-giving worship possible in this community, that we need to be engaged with issues of social import, and that we need to serve a broader role than just Sunday morning in connecting people to their spirituality over the long arch of their lives – so, we'll be doing some programming around retirement and making meaning, for instance, along with reaching out to community partners at Northwestern. Some of this will be awesome – some of it will fail spectacularly, but we are going to try a lot of new things as we discover who we want to become.

The thing is that there's not exactly an agreed upon meaning for church in the 21st century, but I think a progressive place like this committed to interfaith work and meaning and spirituality is going to have a place for people here in Evanston and beyond, and it will be something we make together. With all of our faults and glories on display. That's church in a vulnerable mode. There will be change, but that doesn't mean that we will only do new things. Worship will remain closely aligned with what it has been, music will undoubtedly be fantastic, and we will remain committed to interfaith conversations, peace and justice concerns, and the host of things that make Lake Street Lake Street.

There are challenges, but there is so much to be excited about today and for the future. Today is a day to celebrate that excitement. I hope you'll join me for ice cream and celebration in coffee hour as we commit to being here. There will be change, but I have some promises for you – I will always listen to feedback, I will always tell you why we're doing something, and I will always, always be committed to Lake Street growing and striving to be the best it can possibly be. I am all in here, won't you be too? It won't be possible without everyone here's great gifts for this community.

Church does not have to be dour, said the man in stark black robes at the front of the church, I do recognize the irony. But it's true. Don't forget church can be dynamic, agile in changing, and a place that is exciting to be. So buckle up. The church year has begun.