

What Is It That We Do Here, Anyway?

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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I was out at a community event this past month, and someone stopped me, and said, “I always wonder about your church. It’s got signs out front for black lives matter, a rainbow flag, and a ton of flags in front for a mass shootings – what is it that you are doing over there?” Now, I wish I could perfectly relay exactly the sort of curiosity and skepticism mixed together that she asked it with. It was perfect. Like, “I don’t know what you’re up to over there – it’s not exactly OK with me, but I am also intrigued.” And I live for those moments – to say, well, we’re up to lots of stuff, let me tell you about it. We’re committed to seeking justice and being with people on paths of illness and grief. We’re into innovative worship experiences and other traditions, but if you like traditional church music, you’re going to love this place. We have 21st century minded people, but our church looks like a 19th century beautiful Victorian gothic building and that’s cool. I only got about halfway through my explanation, but it felt like one of those questions that you wished that you’d get asked a little more often. The truth is, that when people find out what I do, they don’t have many questions. They seem to know exactly what church is, and the answer isn’t anything good. People don’t have a lot of questions about what we do here, even if they perhaps should. That being said, when someone does give you the gift of asking what we do here, I hope that you will be able to give some response that comes from somewhere deep inside. This sermon is a brief attempt at giving you something to chew on about what we do here. That means it’s also for your benefit to give some thought – if you haven’t thought lately about what we do here, this is also for you.

First, we are a place that says yes. That’s important because it means that we are not about perfection, but we are about giving people a place where they can explore the gifts that God has given them, where they can try on new roles, and where they can be surprised and grateful for the experience of collaboration and service to this community. If you are a place that says yes, then you get a lot of great efforts and innovations that happen spontaneously, and there’s not a real center of gravity and power in this place. Rather, anyone with will and vision can probably see what happens here. If you say no, then you are left with so much energy, and perhaps even so much that God could be calling us to do, on the table. Church is properly a place that says yes, and it ought to have very good reasons for saying no, like something really not being in keeping with the character of this congregation.

Second, we are a place that has a diversity of opinions, whether that’s about theology or this congregation, or the world. We come at things from a variety of different angles, we have different life experiences – the meeting together of folks with different viewpoints in which we learn to be with one another without forcing everyone to think alike, is the

hallmark of what church ought to be. We do not have to think alike in order to form a community, if we are committed to respecting difference. Do you think that Jesus' apostles all thought alike? If you go and read the Bible, after Jesus exits the scene they are pretty much constantly in disagreement about some core issues. Yet, they are able to pull it together by respecting some different viewpoints. In Paul's body metaphor, we are not all the same, but we only thrive, survive, and pursue our goals together. We only have meaning in relationship to each other and to the body.

Third, we are a womb of contemplation and action. This line from our covenant always stirs a real sense of appreciation in me. As a womb we are encouraged to ask at church, "what is it that we are giving birth to in our time together?" How different and exciting it is to ask what our joined efforts will give birth to, rather than focusing on things that divide or insisting on doctrinal purity! It also becomes a model for challenging us to be intentional about how we approach our time here. We should be like those who exit the womb, inquisitive, reaching and growing, sometimes crying and wailing, but just as often laughing. We ought to bring that curiosity and that sense of adventure to our time together here at Lake Street Church. We ought to ask one another, "is that the sort of spirit we ought to bring to the womb today?" It also challenges us that our time ought not to be idle. We are doing something here that is worth doing. We are building community and figuring out how to make meaning in this fragmented world. We are fighting for justice for our world's most vulnerable. We are striving to unite our song with God's.

So, the next time someone asks you in a skeptical tone, just what is it that you do over there, anyway, you'll still have to come up with something because none of this is very pithy or short at all. It's all complicated. Perhaps the best is to say, to quote the gospels, "come and see." But for us as we move forward it's a good reminder to know that we are a place that says yes, a place that respects different opinions, and a place that is constantly asking what we are called to give birth to in this world. Amen and blessed be.