

Two stories. One from Fred Plumer of the Center for Progressive Christianity. While the center was in the process of developing their new children's curriculum, Fred was running around the country trying to raise money for the project and was invited to meet with the board of a small non-profit foundation in southern California. At the meeting was a young woman who was in charge of determining if a grant request met the foundations criteria. Fred says: "From the very beginning she hammered me with questions like how is this curriculum going to help the world, the homeless, and the women in the Congo. I knew I was on the defensive pretty quickly but was surprised by her emotions. At one point, she stunned me when she asked: '*Why does it have to be Christian?*'"

Frankly it was not her question that startled me. It was the way she said it. It sounded ugly."

The second story is from a TV interview with the famous atheist, Richard Dawkins. When asked what ethics and values he lives by, since he is opposed to any religious ideas, Dawkins replied, "Oh, the usual: do to others what you would like them to do to you" - not realizing I guess, that those words, in one form or another, appear in every one of the world's religions.

These two stories are illustrations of the reality of today's religious landscape. And on one level, we can understand where it comes from. Fred Plumer said about his encounter with the young woman on the foundation board: "I have run into some of that hostility with young adults whose primary encounter with Christianity had been through the conservative, evangelical and mega-church type of Christianity. Most of the time they just want to ignore the issue. But for this young woman, 'Christian' had nothing but negative connotations. I don't think she is so unique with young adults in our respective societies."

He also had this to say about Dawkins: "Dawkins and his gang are having a ball making religion in general and Christianity in particular look silly. I know he and others have created a 'straw god' so he can easily knock it down but let's face it, he has a lot of silliness to work with."

We have to admit that it is a huge challenge to be a Christian today. The Church has lost a lot of credibility and influence. In today's Chron there's an article about extravagant weddings, theorizing that "overblown weddings cover up a sense of emptiness in a time when religious authority is sliding."

This isn't news to us. Many people are aware that there are policies, doctrines, and rituals in need of an overhaul. And there are places in the Church where this is happening. But the movement is still small.

It is telling that, even though the number of *individuals* who have affiliated with tpc.org has grown, the number of congregations that have affiliated has not. The reason often given is that the leadership doesn't want to go through anything that might cause waves or conflict. On the other hand, Fred Plumer says, "I could write a book about the people who contact my office who are members of a church and want their church to change but cannot get the leadership to change, especially the ministers."

So it seems that we're in a time of tentative change. It creates a dilemma for us, as followers of Jesus, in knowing how to present Christianity to an often-hostile or indifferent world? Although really our situation is not new at all. It has often been said that the church of the 21st century is more like the church of the 1st century. When you take away all the layers accumulated over the centuries and imposed by political expediency, theological battles, and societal influences, and what you we have? You have a spiritual community struggling to make its way, to establish its credibility.

Take the reading from I Kings, a healing story from the life and ministry of the prophet Elijah, and the gospel reading from Luke, a healing story from the life and ministry of Jesus. The difference between Luke's original readers and us is that they would not have had a lectionary that paired this healing story with an Old Testament story about Elijah.

They would have known that story well and would have recognized immediately that Jesus was now doing the same things that Elijah had done. Luke was presenting Jesus in a way that people could identify with who he was and what he was doing. He was giving Jesus “credentials.”

Much like Paul was doing in his letter to the Galatians. He had to establish his apostolic credentials, to establish the authority of his teaching over against other teachers who had come to the Galatian church. They were teaching that the Gentiles among them had to follow Judaic law before they could follow Jesus. They accused Paul of preaching a "Christianity Lite" and questioned his authority as an apostle.

So - the early Church had to establish its credentials with both believers and non-believers, with supporters and opponents. Paul wrote “the gospel I proclaim to you is no mere human invention. I did not receive it from any person . . .” Luke wrote in such a way that everyone would realize that what Jesus had brought to the world was not a mere human invention, but was a continuation in the line of the prophets of God. Remember at the transfiguration? Jesus on the mountaintop with Moses and Elijah? That meeting established his creds with Peter, James and John.

Now, in the 21st century, we have to establish our creds. We have to give people good reasons to listen to us and believe that we have something of value to share with them. Although today, comparing Jesus to Elijah might not be as effective as it was back then. Today, we have books that compare the sayings of Jesus and the sayings of the Buddha. We connect Jesus' version of the Golden Rule with the versions of other religious traditions. We remind people that reformers like Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. found their inspiration in the life and teachings of Jesus. We watch series like *Saving Jesus* to help us reclaim and repackage or re-present a Christianity that might inspire something in a young woman like at Fred Plumer's meeting other than hatred or suspicion.

I was at the memorial service yesterday for Jack Lundin. And a magnificent send-off it was, complete with a jazz combo and liturgy from Jack's own *Liturgies for Life*. Jeff Johnson quoted from a Time magazine cover story from 1969 that could have been written today: “The most notable fact in religion today is that ministers of all denominations are trying, somewhat desperately but with immense energy and imagination, to find new ways to carry God back into the everyday life of society and to make him, in the prevailing cliché of the day, "relevant." This is not primarily a theological movement. Still, important new trends in theology suggest that God may best be met in the co-creation of a more humane society or, internally, in the deepest structures of our own psyches. As so often in the history of faith, this new effort to build a new ministry is a reaction against past failures.” Included in the article, of course, was the young pastor Lundin and the Community of Christ the Servant in Chicago.

The bulletin yesterday had a quote from Jack's book, *A Church for an Open Future*. I'm going to quote just a little bit of it, because although it was written in 1977, it still has wisdom for us as we consider how to present Jesus in this place and time.

“Jesus was a harbinger of creative change, and his ministry brought a new dimension, a new hope, to those who thought about themselves and their lives in relationship to God. He gave them reason to go beyond law, beyond cult, beyond their own understanding, beyond themselves and their structures.

He called them into a new dynamic in which faith learns from unfaith, in which there is a different kind of tension between insiders and outsiders, in which a new sense of vulnerability and ordinariness and spontaneity all offer up fresh and unexpected gifts to a faith that is embedded in life,

in which restlessness and curiosity replace dependency and absolutes,

in which worship exposes us to ourselves as homo ludens (playful people) and God as the one who invited us to live out our resurrection now,

in which there is no guarantee that our faith will survive unless we offer it up to a genuine struggle to keep rediscovering;

in which we share trust with the young and the wisdom of such trusting with adults;

in which there is no available measuring tool for worth other than the whimsical perspectives of a grace and devotion which God has for us and which while causing us to pause in restored wholeness, insistently pushes us into being a church for an open future.”

We're beginning the summer months here at First United with a theme of growth: Growing as a Congregation of Disciples. And as I sat in the Chapel yesterday and heard these words, I remembered why Jack Lundin was such an inspiration to this congregation – and to me.

“It is only fair and right that at this early point in the argument for change I declare myself as a full-fledge, unashamed radical-in-the-faith, that is, as one of tradition, of roots which run ancient and deep which upon occasion also run counter grain to what we usually get away with in our popular labeling of 'tradition,' some of it not getting beyond what was good enough for grandma! . . . The radical center never ceases to dig for roots through a mind which probes and which also uses the dialogical constructs which help sharpen the live options in parish and personal life.”

I take these words that Jack has left us as our marching orders, our mission, our purpose: to be like Jesus, a harbinger of creative change. And to be like his disciple Jack, an unashamed radical-in-the-faith. May “First Untidy” (as Jack always called us) follow in this servant’s footsteps.

Amen