

First Sunday after Pentecost, June 9, 2019

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Meeting, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister (based on Acts 2.1)

SCRIPTURE The reading this morning is a single verse from the Acts of the Apostles. From the second chapter, the first verse: “When the day of Pentecost had come, the followers of Jesus were all together in one place.” Which is to say, on the day of Pentecost the followers of Jesus were in a meeting.

PRAYER Gracious God, come near. Bend low. Enter this house. Come so near to each of us as to oil the hinges of our hearts doors, that they may swing gently and easily to welcome you in.

SERMON Preaching has many and various purposes: to persuade, to edify, to teach, to inspire, to comfort, to give hope, to open up and expose our ancient, sacred texts to scrutiny, to exposition, and to wring from them whatever new morsels of understanding we might.

I confess that today’s sermon will offer no comfort. Is unlikely to inspire. It is, however, intended to persuade; to convince you of something that matters deeply to the life of this church; something without which we – Old South Church, and the United Church of Christ – cannot be church.

Pentecost happened, the church was born on Pentecost, because of a meeting. Had the followers of Jesus not been meeting – had the Holy Spirit swept itself into an empty room – well, who knows! But surely there would be no birthing of the church. At least not that day. The Christian church was born in a meeting.

Old South Church in Boston was born on May 12, 1669 in the course of a meeting. Additionally, there were a great many pre-meetings – long, difficult, contentious, anxious meetings – leading up that inaugurating meeting. Ever since, across 350 years, our members and ministers have not stopped meeting.

We meet to call new clergy, to buy and sell property, to build buildings, to decide to relocate, to found institutions, to agree curriculum, to discern how best to serve God in each new day. We meet to pass budgets, which to us, are theological statements, revealing our priorities. We meet to agree theological commitments, to shape social statements. We meet to listen to one another with the expectation that each of us has much to learn from other perspectives, experiences, and passions. We meet to grapple with hard questions and to test whether, as the body of Christ in a particular time and place, we can achieve consensus, and meet the new challenges of each new day.

In the end, we meet for the purposes of bringing into our bruised and battered world a little more mercy, a little more hope, more healing, more love, more relief, and more justice.

I have in my office – in the Senior Minister’s Study on the 3rd floor – the account of a Congregational meeting held in Boise City, Idaho Territory in 1872. The meeting was called by the Rev. Myron Eells, a Congregational minister and missionary to the American West. He

graduated from Hartford Theological Seminary, in Hartford, Connecticut in 1871 and then ventured west to bring the Gospel to vast stretches of untamed wilderness.

When he arrived in Boise City he was more than 200 miles from his closest ministerial colleague. He was 500 hundred miles from any ecclesiastical organization. Nevertheless, as a Congregationalist – because nothing can happen without a meeting, because we *believe* in meetings – he called a meeting.

He elected himself, in various guises, to all offices and committee positions. As President he presided. As clerk, he took the minutes. There and then, by his lonesome, he formed the Idaho Territory Association of the Congregational Church.

Later, with a straight face, he sent an account of the meeting to a Congregational newspaper. The newspaper promptly published the proceedings, announcing and lauding the formation of the Idaho Territory Association of the Congregational Church.

Still later, having established the Idaho Territory Association of the Congregational Church, Reverend Eells went on to found a Congregational Church in Boise, Idaho. Thereafter, the meetings he called were somewhat better attended.

Old South Church and the United Church of Christ believe in meetings. We believe in meetings because we believe, deep in our in our theological bones, that no one person (no matter how wise or kind) should make important decisions on behalf of the rest of us.

We believe that that the product of a good meeting – of a thoughtful, well-crafted meeting, comprised populated of thoughtful, committed and humble people (humble, by which I mean people who are willing to listen, not just talk) – will be a better than whatever might be produced by a single person, however well meaning.

We also believe in meetings because we are suspicious of too much churchly authority vested in too few people. In addition, we are suspicious of too much churchly authority vested in persons who do not adequately represent the rest of us. For instance, we are actively opposed to the proposition that men should be in charge, or clergy, or white people, or straight people, or old people, or long-termers.

At Old South Church, you will find no board or committee that is not comprised of a mixture of men and women, straight and queer, new-comers and old-timers. In addition, we are at pains to ensure that our boards and committees are comprised, so far as we are able, of people of all colors, from all family configurations, from various walks of life, and representing our different worship services.

For us this is a profoundly theological commitment. It is the commitment of a people who believe that human diversities are a gift from our Creator. We believe that human diversities are delightful and to be embraced. In addition, practically speaking, we believe that human diversities will yield richer conversations, offer wider perspectives, promise deeper discernment, and produce finer and more faithful decision making.

Now this high view of meetings is something of a minority position. Not everyone believes in meetings or appreciates their potential:

About meetings, Dave Barry, American Writer, says this: “If you had to identify, in one word, the reason why the human race has not achieved, and never will achieve, its full potential, that word would be ‘meetings’.”

About meetings, John Kenneth Galbraith, Canadian Writer and Economist, says this: “Meetings are indispensable when you don’t want to do anything.”

About meetings, Peter F. Drucker, American Educator and Writers, says this: “Meetings are a symptom of bad organization. The fewer meetings the better.”

About meetings, an Unknown Author, says this: “A committee is a group of the unwilling, chosen from the unfit, to do the unnecessary.”

Frankly, it’s easy to dismiss and disparage meetings; to mock them and those of us who attend meetings. I have been to a lot of bad meetings, poorly run meetings, so I know meetings can be frustrating. I also know that Congregationalists cannot do church without meetings. And, that good meetings produce good things, even great things.

I know this about meetings: The difference between patriarchal churches and this church: meetings, and who is in the meeting, who has voice. The difference between this church and those churches that discriminate against LGBTQ people: meetings, and who is allowed at the table, who has been granted voice and vote. The difference between this church and those churches that still struggle to get it right over predatory priests: meetings, and who is allowed at the table, who has been granted voice and vote, and who keeps the minutes.

For those who follow the Congregational Way, meetings are a theological and ecclesiastical necessity. More than that, they are a theological and ecclesiastical good! If we aim to be a church without a bishop; if we believe in the ministry of the laity; if we believe that God has implanted in every human a spark of the divine – we (the widest “we” that we can assemble) have no choice but to meet.

It is all too easy to disparage and mock meetings. Allow me to offer the other side:

Margaret Mead, American Cultural Anthropologist: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

And this, by an unknown author “History is written by people who attend meetings, stay until the end, and keep the minutes.”

Without church meetings there would be no ordination of women, no policy to be open to and affirming of LGBTQ people. Without meetings there would be no Boston Tea Party; Phillis Wheatley’s book of poems, the first book by an enslaved, African American female poet, would not have been published in 1773.

Make fun of them or roll your eyes at them, but church meetings are a powerful tool for good, for progress, for discernment, consensus, decision and action. Meetings can change the world.

The Christian church was born in a meeting. Ever since then, it is in meetings – year after year, decade after decade, century after century – that the church is continually reformed, renewed and improved.

Next time you're invited to a church meeting, do yourself a favor and do the church a favor. Show up. Speak up. Change the world.