

Jeff's Jottings

Kudos to Willmar. What about us?

May 17, 2019

By Jeff Japinga
Executive Presbyterian

Thomas Friedman is a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner. He writes a weekly column for The New York Times, and books and articles on foreign affairs, global trade, the Middle East, globalization, and environmental issues. He's also a native son to the Twin Cities, born and raised in Saint Louis Park.

His Tuesday Times column was headlined, "[President Trump, Come to Willmar](#)." (Thanks, Jim Brasel, for calling it to my attention.) In it, he hails the west-central Minnesota town as a modern, successful, American melting pot. "I've been trying to understand why some communities rise and others fall," he writes of a two-year long tour of cities and small towns across this country, "and so many of the answers can be found in Willmar." He continues:

The answers to three questions in particular make all the difference: 1) Is your town hungry for workers to fill open jobs? 2) Can your town embrace the new immigrants ready to do those jobs, immigrants who may come not just from Latin America, but also from nonwhite and non-Christian nations of Africa or Asia? And 3) Does your town have a critical mass of "leaders without authority"?

It's that third question that especially caught my ear. For as Friedman goes on to illustrate the efforts of "business leaders, educators, philanthropists and social entrepreneurs ready to lead their community toward inclusion and problem-solving," there was one group I kept looking for but never found.

The faith community.

This is NOT a swipe at the churches of Willmar, not at all. I know in fact of one Presbyterian who is highly involved with the city, not only “ready to lead” but doing so. And persons of faith are so often living out their commitments in ways so fully integrated into their business and personal lives that it’s easy to miss, even for a seasoned writer like Tom Friedman.

Still, Friedman’s omission has me wondering: will the church — will I — be part of that “critical mass of ‘leaders without authority’” ready to make a difference in our communities? And will we do that out loud, grounded and sent from a bold theology of Christ that proclaims inclusion and wholeness and safe space for all to thrive? Time and again, I have observed the irresistible nature of churches revived, and persons renewed, when motivated and inspired by its beliefs to love widely and care deeply for those around them. It’s why I remain positive about our future: In a world where caustic, narrow divisions abound, it’s the welcoming, inclusive, big-hearted churches speaking the language of faith that have a real allure. And value.

Maybe we ought to talk about that more. Maybe I ought to. I wonder if Tom Friedman would take my call!