

Becoming...

A Five-Week Pastoral Reflection Series

Over the years, I've come to believe that one of the greatest gifts we can cultivate as the church is the practice of discernment — not simply making decisions, but learning to notice where God is already at work, and joining in.

These reflections grew out of my own journey as a pastor and bishop, and years of walking alongside congregations through seasons of joy, uncertainty, grief, and renewal. They aren't a method or a strategic plan. They're an invitation into a way of seeing — and paying attention together.

Across these five weeks, that practice unfolds in stages: learning to ask better questions, noticing the stories we tell, seeing as Jesus sees, discerning together, and — through it all — becoming.

My hope is that these reflections spark conversation in congregations, council meetings, and around kitchen tables, and that they help us become a people who ask better questions, listen more deeply, and trust the Holy Spirit to guide us. As you'll discover, they describe not only how I hope congregations approach discernment, but also, quietly, how the Office of the Bishop seeks to accompany them.

+Bp. Sue





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Pastoral Reflection #1

Learning to Ask Better Questions

There is a question I've been asked throughout much of my ministry. "What's your vision?" It is a good question.

In the church, we often expect leaders to have a compelling picture of the future—a destination they can describe with clarity and confidence so others will follow. For years, though, I found myself uncomfortable with that question. Not because I didn't care about the future. But because I had rarely experienced God's leading in quite that way.

Some years ago I shared this frustration with a dear friend who has also served as a spiritual director for me. "I don't seem to have that kind of big vision people expect from a bishop," I told her. She smiled and replied, "No...but you have a big field of vision that allows you to notice what God is up to and then join in."

I've carried those words with me ever since. They gave language to something I had experienced for years but had never quite been able to name. My calling has rarely felt like inventing God's future. It has felt much more like paying attention. Watching. Listening. Wondering. Praying. Trying to discern where the Holy Spirit is already at work—and then inviting others to participate.

One of the things ministry has taught me is that the questions we ask determine the things we notice. If I'm asking, "*How do we get people back into church?*" I notice one set of things. If I'm asking, "*How do we balance the budget?*" I notice another. Those are important questions. Every leader has to wrestle with them.

But over time I've become convinced that there is a deeper question that comes first: Where is God already at work? That question has reshaped the way I lead. Over time, I've come to believe that this isn't simply my own way of leading. It is, in fact, a deeply biblical way of following Jesus.

Throughout Scripture, faithful leaders are less often described as people with extraordinary foresight than as people who learn to pay attention to God's presence and activity.

Moses notices a bush that burns but is not consumed and discovers that holy ground has been beneath his feet all along. The young Samuel gradually learns to recognize a voice he had mistaken for someone else's. Elijah discovers that God's presence is not found in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in the sound of sheer silence.

Jesus continually notices the people everyone else overlooks—the widow, the child, Zacchaeus in the tree, Bartimaeus by the roadside—and in doing so reveals the heart of God's kingdom. On the

road to Emmaus, the disciples discover that Christ has been walking beside them long before they recognize him in the breaking of the bread.

Later, as the early church wrestles with one of its greatest disagreements, the leaders do not announce a grand vision. Instead, after prayer, listening, testimony, Scripture, and conversation, they humbly write, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."

Again and again, Scripture portrays faithful leadership not as certainty about the future, but as careful attentiveness to God's activity in the present. That realization has been quietly reshaping my own understanding of leadership.

Over the past several years, one word has increasingly captured that journey for me: Becoming. Becoming reminds us that God's work with us is never finished. Congregations are becoming. Leaders are becoming. Communities are becoming. Our synod is becoming. Most importantly, we are becoming. Not because we have discovered the perfect strategy. Not because we finally have all the answers. But because, by God's grace, we are continually being formed into the people God is calling us to be.

Paul writes to the Philippians with confidence, "The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." That is the promise. God is not finished with us. And because God is not finished with us, we need not pretend that we have everything figured out.

Instead, perhaps our first calling is simply to pay attention. To notice. To discern. And then to join in. I sometimes wonder whether the church has become very good at planning, measuring, evaluating, and strategizing—and less practiced at paying attention. Those things have their place. They help us steward resources faithfully and make wise decisions. But they are not the same as discernment.

The church does not first need better strategies; it first needs better practices of attention. Faithful leaders are not called to manufacture God's future; they are called to cultivate a wide enough field of vision to notice where God is already at work, discern the Spirit's invitation, and invite others to participate in what God is already bringing to life.

Perhaps that is one way of understanding what it means to follow Jesus. Not simply believing the right things about Jesus. But learning to notice what Jesus notices. To pay attention to the people and places others overlook. To recognize signs of God's kingdom already breaking into the world. To trust that the Holy Spirit is always ahead of us.

The final pages of Scripture end not with the church completing its work but with a promise: "See, I am making all things new." Notice the tense. Not *I have made*. But *I am making*. God is still at work. The Church is still becoming. We are still becoming. And perhaps the first step in joining God's work is learning to notice where God is already at work among us.

+Bp. Sue