

"God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us"
(Romans 5:5).

If you were in church this past Sunday, you were treated to a powerful sermon by Rev. Jeff Kjellberg of Kairos and Associates. Jeff is in town this week to meet with a wide variety of folks in our congregation both individually and in groups to get a sense of our mission discernments and priorities. If you were like me, his opening words caught you off guard: "Newsflash: The church is in decline."

Certainly, this can't be news to any of us. For the past few decades, congregations within the ELCA and other mainline denominations have experienced a steady decline both in membership, worship attendance and revenues. We've seen that here at Incarnate Word as well over the years. Our building isn't as full on a Sunday morning as it was decades ago.

For the past many years, congregations have attempted to address this decline in a variety of ways, most of which have been cosmetic in nature. If we just add guitars, drums and big TV screens to worship, folks will come. If we take the word "Lutheran" out of our name, folks will come. If we just utilize social media more, folks will come. Despite these "attractional" efforts, the church has still been in decline. In his sermon, Jeff offered us two reasons why this is so.

1. We've addressed the cosmetic without asking the deeper question, "Why do we need to be the church today?"
2. We have looked to our own ideas on how to "fix" this problem without connecting to that "primary resource that has been with us the whole time....the gift of the Trinity and specifically the power and role of the Holy Spirit in our lives."

There can be no doubt that the Covid pandemic, which has kept us apart, has not helped the church in this time of decline. But here's the thing that brings me hope right now. While many congregations are just holding on to dear life waiting to see what will come post-Covid, we are taking the initiative here at Incarnate Word, to ask the tough questions, "Why are we here?" and "Do we trust God's got this?" We're not asking how to do ministry. We are asking WHY we do ministry. Does God need us here in the city? And if so, why? Wouldn't it be easier to just stay home, quarantined away from everybody outside our immediate bubble? We could be doing so many other things on a Sunday morning or throughout the week, yet we choose to come together at 597 East Avenue to be fed by the Spirit on a Sunday morning and to feed others throughout the week. Why?

As we continue to progress through this Listening Phase with Kairos and Associates, I have no idea where the Spirit will lead. But I have no doubt that just by the very fact that we are engaged in this process, she is alive and well and with us. And if the Spirit is indeed with us, we will be led to pray, discern and live into our congregation's name, Incarnate Word—"God's Word made flesh." I can't wait to see where you and I are led from here!

Peace and Love,
Pastor Doug