

“THE FEELING OF ALIVENESS”

By Pastor Marc van Bulck

If you've stepped into my office here at the church, you've probably noticed a large painting hanging on the wall behind my desk. It's a painting of Castle Well, an historic castle in the Netherlands where I studied abroad for a semester in college. I keep that painting in my office for a number of reasons. First of all, it represents a lot of fond memories that I have during that time in my life – being a young college student and travelling abroad. Experiencing new things.

However, it also carries a deeper significance to me. Castle Well was where I first experienced God's call to ministry. It reminds me of who I was at the time, what was at stake for me at that time, and how directly my first real feeling of call was tied to that time and place. When I walk into my office at the church and see that painting, it reminds me of who I am and why I entered into the ministry in the first place. Unfortunately I don't have time to tell the whole story in a newsletter article like this one. If you'd like to hear it, I'd be happy to share it with you over a cup of coffee.

What I can share with you is that the moment God finally got my attention happened late one evening around a table in a small café in that small farming town in the Netherlands. I found myself surrounded by other students sharing questions, confession, emotions, doubts, around this whole notion of religion, the concept of God, and maybe even some awe at this whole mystery that we're all living in together. I doubt very many of us around that table that night identified as “believers” per se but the feeling of “aliveness” in that moment was profound.

I wonder if Jesus' disciples felt something like that in the presence of Jesus? I doubt that very many of the people who followed this man from Nazareth were people who put on fancy robes, had degrees from some seminary somewhere, or were probably all that particularly good at praying in front of large groups of people. They were ordinary people perhaps not all that different from you or me.

Jesus who is a figure many might consider to be shrouded in that same mystery that we're all just trying to live into. John believed that he embodied it (or in his exact words: “the Word became flesh”- 1:13). We've debated his exact nature for centuries. However, I wonder if at the end of the day, his followers dropped their nets because something about this man from Nazareth made them feel just a little bit more alive inside.

I suppose, in some way, that's kind of the reason why I'm here, too. Jesus made me feel just a little more alive inside. One of my greatest joys (among many) that I have serving as your Associate Pastor is gathering around the table with many of our campus students. Whether it's for a meal after worship or at gatherings like Progressive Christian Students on-campus each Monday night, many of our students here in Oxford come from different ecumenical faith backgrounds (or maybe no faith background at all).

And I suppose not unlike that night around the table long ago back in a town in Holland, our communities of faith here in Oxford are trying to create spaces of our own where our students can share questions, curiosities, doubts, and maybe even awe of their own at the great mystery together. It's truly inspiring to me.

As I look at that painting each morning when I walk into the church office and as we all live into the mystery together, I am reminded that (as Joseph Campbell once said):

"We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for [our spiritual predecessors] have gone before us - the labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the...path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves...and where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world."

Be at peace this week,

Marc