

A Word from our General Presbyter Ed Thompson

This summer, I've been working through "The Beulah Quintet," five novels by Mary Lee Settle that trace one family's story from the time of the Puritan Revolution in England through their settlement on the frontier of West Virginia until the modern day. I'm currently in Book III, Know Nothing, which is set in the years before the Civil War.

One sentence from the first part of the book really struck me. Johnny Catlett had traveled down the Ohio River to Cincinnati, where he meets Leah, the woman who will become his wife. After they marry, he brings her back to Beulah, the family's plantation that lies somewhere around Gauley Bridge, where the New and Gauley rivers come together to form the Kanawha. From the steamboat, Leah gets her first glimpse of slavery. When she tries to express what troubles her about what she sees, her new husband says, "Don't see only what you are looking for."

In some ways, I have to agree with that statement. There's always more to the story than what we know. If we only see what we're looking for, we will miss a lot. Our preconceived notions can blind us to a greater reality than what we're expecting or what we think we know.

Sometimes people have preconceived notions about our state. They look for poverty, coal mines and drug abuse, and they find it. In doing so, they can miss the caring teachers, wonderful musicians, good restaurants and dedicated doctors that are here.

I also think sometimes church members see only what they're looking for. They see a warm, caring community instead of people who sometimes ignore visitors. When they look at the sanctuary, they don't see the empty pews; they see the saints of a previous generation, the friends and family members who have passed away. The peeling paint doesn't bother them. They don't notice the mold in the bathrooms and the kitchen. They don't care that the carpet has faded, some notices have been left on the bulletin board for several years or the church website hasn't been updated for several months. They don't need signs. They know where to park and what door to enter. It's their church, and they love it. That can be a good thing.

In other ways though, I find that statement troubling. In the context of the story, the fact that Leah Catlett was expecting to see human cruelty and slaves being physically abused doesn't mean that she should ignore or overlook that reality. While the story skips over their romance, one wonders if maybe she shouldn't have had some frank conversations with her future husband about his views on slavery. Maybe that would have put the kibosh on their relationship. But, then, maybe love is blind.

We don't want to look at our churches with a negative attitude, but we need to be honest. Looking for signs of deferred maintenance, for things that need to be improved or fixed isn't tearing the church down; it's building the church up.

Sometimes, two churches will arrange to have members from one church visit the other, so they can see things with fresh eyes. They look for signs about where to park, what door to use and how to get to the sanctuary once they enter the building. They can be frank about how they were welcomed – or not welcomed. They can point out where the bulletin is confusing or if the piano is out of tune. They can give a frank appraisal of the bathrooms, the bulletin boards and the nursery – if there is a nursery.

"Don't see only what you're looking for." Maybe we should balance that sentence by saying, "Don't deny the reality of what you see." What do you see? What do you expect to see? What are you looking for? Or, when it comes to the church, maybe a better question is "What does God see?" And how can we look at the church with the eyes of God, seeing the love, the grace and the joy that is there while admitting maybe we can do better and maybe we need to change a few things so people can experience God's love instead of being bothered by what we've just gotten used to.