

Things are feeling pretty good here at St. Paul's. Right? Since arriving to be your pastor (and pastoral family) last July, we've come through the 'back-to-school' season. We survived our first annual stewardship drive together. We had a meaningful Advent and Christmas, and – hard as it is to believe — we're already thru the first two of months of 2017, heading into the season of Lent which begins Wednesday. We've also kicked off a year of celebration for our 130 years of ministry in the heart of Coronado. But after 8 months together, I'm beginning to wonder when and how this 'honeymoon' period will come to an end... (That's what consultants call the initial phase of a pastoral transition – the honeymoon. It typically lasts between 6 and 18 months.)

In 2003, after leaving the Associate position at La Jolla UMC to pastor the CUMC in Borrego Springs, I recall, a few months in, that the Church Council Chair expressed his sincere belief that our honeymoon period would go on and on. That's how much he and the congregation were appreciating us.

That was *before* I had the temerity to rearrange the Easter lilies on the chancel to create more space for the choir. The person who had initially arranged the lilies lost his cool. That person was the Church Council Chair! To his credit, after leaving in a huff, he came back and apologized. He realized he'd 'lost it' over something minor in the grand scheme of things. He was both sorry and embarrassed. (But 'majoring in the minors' is so often how relationships break down; in marriages, in families, between neighbors, and in churches... We escalate the threat level from DEFCON 5 to DEFCON 3 over the silliest things! Like the arrangement of Easter lilies!)

I recently provided my District Superintendent – the guy who brought us to St. Paul's -- an update on how the transition was going after 6 months. I shared that even though we'd entered December 29K in the red, your mammoth generosity in the last 30 days of the year enabled us to end 2016 3K in the black. (Thank you!) I shared how, as of December, we've welcomed 25 new members (with more on the horizon). I shared that the results of our 2017 Stewardship Campaign

indicated an increase in pledges and other giving somewhere in the neighborhood of 18 percent. And, compared against the last 6 months of 2015, attendance for the same period in 2016 was up an average of 39 people per week.

You might think, based on all of this, that I'd be feeling really good. And you'd be right! I'm looking at all of these markers and thinking these signs reveal that we are making a really solid transition. In fact, I am not sure how it could be better. Even so, I hesitate... because I'm not sure we should feel good about the particular 'markers of success' that I shared with my DS.

Sure, there's a sense of validation. If people are coming to worship and joining the church, I must be doing something right. (And while the pious thing to say is that God is doing this -- and that is true -- the evidence suggests that, at the very least, I'm not getting in God's way!) I think it's also safe to say that our Finance Committee is feeling better than it was last November! And I'm sure my superiors, the Superintendent and my Bishop, would see these markers as signs that they made a Spirit-guided decision bringing us together as church and pastor.

Still, these markers of success seem awfully worldly -- 'first worldly' if you get my meaning. We in the U.S. see increasing numbers as signs of success. More people, greater giving, upward trends, these are markers we've been trained to heed. More is good. Even more is better. This week I saw a senator explain to his constituents that economic growth following the 2008 recession had averaged less than 3 percent a year. The economy grew, he said, but not enough! I'm not agreeing or disagreeing; just pointing out the worldview that informs our days. More is good. Even more is better. It's the air we breathe.

But then we come across passages where Jesus says something that doesn't quite fit into this 'bigger is better' worldview. In Matthew 5 Jesus uses the metaphors of 'salt' and 'light' (candle-light!) when he tells his disciples what we are to be in the world. In other places, our Lord's metaphors for his community of witnesses are similarly modest: yeast, a pearl, a mustard seed.

Jesus speaks of his ‘little flock’ which he sends out ‘as sheep in the midst of wolves.’

Taken together, the metaphors suggest that Jesus was not asking his disciples to engage in world conquering actions; that Jesus was not focused on establishing a religion where success would be measured by members and buildings and balanced budgets and the power to influence politics.

Yes, yes, Jesus gave us the great commission to go and make disciples of all nations, but he also cautioned that in our efforts to ‘gain the whole world’ we could, if we were not exceedingly careful, lose our souls in the bargain. I sometimes wonder if this is why we struggle to connect younger generations to the church? Not because they have no spiritual yearnings, but because we haven’t figured out how to be the modest but faithful and grace-filled people that Jesus has called us to be?

Yesterday we had a small memorial service where one reading included 10 verses of scripture that precede our main text today, Matthew 5:1-10, the Beatitudes. Taking into account all of the mite sized metaphors that Jesus used to describe his community of followers, one theologian goes on to ask, “How can we read honored texts like the Beatitudes and form an assumption that the Christian faith is credible only if popular, numerically superior, and universally embraced?”

Blessed are the meek? Blessed are those who mourn? Blessed are the merciful? Blessed are the peacemakers and the pure in heart?

As we attend to the teachings of Jesus, I wonder what it would look like if we were truly salt and light for the world today? What would be the markers of success according to the qualities of salt and light?

We, including me, tend to measure a church’s success by the prominence of the congregation. While it is altogether likely that faithful disciples are to be found in the tall-steeple churches at the center of town, they are just as likely to be found

in tiny emerging communities of faith, gathering a handful of young adults in a coffeehouse for safe and honest conversations.

We, including me, tend to measure a church’s vitality by numbers in worship. While it is quite likely that faithful disciples are attending a megachurch, it is just as likely that they are attending a tiny rural congregation that makes sure its elderly neighbors are regularly visited, or that makes the effort to welcome, clothe, and feed refugees from war torn countries.

We, including me, tend to measure a church’s worth by the power and status it’s members have accrued. And while it is likely that faithful disciples are to be found among the titans of commerce or politics, they are just as likely to be found among the unemployed who volunteer to help feed the homeless or who engage in ministries to aid women and children who’ve been victims of human trafficking.¹

None of this means that I will stop praying, as I do most Sundays before worship, that God will fill every seat in every pew. But it does mean that my hope is that this would indeed give glory to God as we become who God has given us to be: salt and light in the unfolding Kingdom of God.

Christine Chakoian observes, ‘If we fail to be true to God’s purpose for us, then what good are we to the world? If we bear the name of Christ but have lost our true essence as salt, then people stop seeing us as useful for anything, and Christ’s good name is squandered. If we say we are followers of Jesus but have hidden Christ’s light under buildings, bureaucracy, and budgets, then we are robbing the world of God’s good gifts.’

“Salt and light may not be the most glamorous elements in the universe, but they are of far more worth than either silver or gold. They are life-giving and useful for the well-being of the world.” And that, ultimately is the marker of success that matters, giving life and well-being to the world. Amen.

¹ These examples are adapted from Christine Chakoian in the *Feasting on the Word* commentary on Matthew.