

Shaking Intentions

We'll soon move into celebrating the season of creation, a season concurrent with our examining community intentions, mission, stewardship, and goals for the congregation and that includes intentions for buildings and grounds for the next years.

Looking forward and setting intentions can be daunting.
Change from a static point, a comfortable stasis, can be fearful.
Trusting in the spirit as we develop our congregational witness can be filled with joy.
It is our purpose.

I want to utilize building design as a parallel metaphor to our Gospel parable as we develop our Christian intentions as a congregation crossing from the material to the human to the holy.

First, Paul provides us in Romans one of the most powerful passages in Scripture-

If God is for us, who can be against us?...

Who will separate us from the love of Christ?...

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Intentions and Hope

We cannot worry about success as the world sees.

In that space of love we are to be fearless. These are God's intentions for us.

Our challenge is, what do we do in this freedom?

If we start from being immersed in a stream of unconditional love, how do we go forward? Intentions are bound within hope.

Mystic and teacher Cynthia Bourgeault tells us hope is a quality of aliveness.

It does not come at the end, as the feeling that results from a happy outcome.

Rather, it lies at the beginning, as a pulse of truth that sends us forth.

A musician outspoken about his faith, Jon Batiste, tells us hope is the language of the invisible. It transcends circumstances because it transcends physicality. It's spiritual.

It's the language of the invisible realm, which is just as real, if not more real, than the things we can see and touch.

Teaching Intentions

I want to speak to intentions in teaching architecture. In a few weeks I will take on a new studio of twenty in a new curriculum based on semesters. A tremendous amount of work has been put in by my colleagues [since I am retired] to discern outcomes, sequences of projects and use of new tools like AI.

Architecture is all about intentions, processes, and outcomes.

The outcome is not fully known but develops.

We envision something well before it becomes manifest in the world.

In studio as faculty, we cherish the student diversity in thought brought to their developing projects- in one studio, twenty different architectural responses across an index of expectations from a common prompt.

But occasionally, a student work emerges that will be conceived and developed along unique intentions we had not considered. To teach that kind of discovery requires one to teach a certain fearlessness coupled with humility to adjust. Intention hope, and surprise.

Shakers and Cistercians

I want to use our church as an example of intention, hope and surprise, but I need to go back a bit to start.

A younger version of me frequently camped in Autumn through New England. The region is heavily wooded, and most homes and small villages have structures made of wood. Much of this is what designers call vernacular architecture- not monuments, but the works built around the commonplace. Their intenders saw little need for the excesses of style or symbols, and they invented construction details in response to years of learning about wood, seasons and climate.

One of the great joys of that time was my discovering one of the great American precedents found there, the Shakers. The Shakers termed themselves the United Society of Believers in Christs' Second Appearance, and in 1774 Ann Lee, one of the Shaker leaders, was given a revelation to go to America, establishing the first Shaker Village in rural New York state.

Shakers lived in common rural agrarian community, with work seen as a form of prayer. They were pacifists, egalitarian, and celibate, meaning they counted on conversions and orphans to grow community.

Their intention within a community of love was utopian – to form a more perfect society on earth. “Hands to work and hearts to God’ was a famous quote, and simplicity was a goal.

Their services were meant to attract, and hospitality to visitors was important to them. Sometimes hundreds of onlookers came from miles around to witness their liturgical movement, danced not in a church, but in a Meeting House, what could be described as a simple rectangular building, an open space, free of columns, altars, lecterns, and symbols. The dance was the practice where community celebrated the presence of love between them gifted by God. It fueled the intentions they took out to the world.

By 1850 they peaked in membership of almost twenty thousand and had established eighteen communal villages across New England and the mid-west.

Shakers designed and invented their own tools, furniture, and buildings. They are prized for their care in detail and craft and considered in highest level of vernacular design in the world. Intentional faith, intentional practice, intentional making.

A whole world from the mustard seed of a faith community out of step with the dominant culture.

They were not alone in joining theology and intentions in space and structure. Our Benedictine family includes the Cistercian order begun in the 12th century by Bernard of Clairvaux.

Cistercians were concerned with the degree of decoration that had run rampant through medieval church design and superfluous ornament distracted from their practice of reflective prayer. They sought simplicity but also innovation- Gothic architecture began with them and flourished due to people experiencing new qualities that their buildings and community made possible.

Shaking intentions of the early church allowed for a new expansive spatial and spiritual world.

Intentions and an Army Chapel

When the US Army decided on a church structure for their facilities in the 1940's, they produced a common pattern built across the bases, including this one from our local Camp Roberts and subsequently moved here in 1999.

The simple structure celebrates the way it is made. Our churches roof trusses span our sanctuary and do not hide behind a dropped ceiling. The windows are tall, and operate, as air conditioning then was not a possibility. The entry was on axis with the roof peak, below a tall steeple, perhaps the one reference to an older symbol. The worshipers faced a stage where our Long Room is, with furnishings on the stage changing with the particular faith community.

The founders of St Benedict chose to shake that design, with hope that a new community would form.

Intentionally, they added a long veranda to the east and placed the two entrances off that side. Intentionally, the long axial aisle to the stage was eliminated and inverted toward a dominant center. Intentionally, pews now looked inward instead of toward a distant elevated stage, also hearkening back to our monastic Benedictine precedent.

The Word is spoken from a lectern placed to the east, the sacramental altar to the west, and Gospel from the center, acknowledging those morning and evening orientations as important from our history. The Eucharist is celebrated in a circle in the center.

When we gather in that open center for the Eucharist
we experience this building in a way very different from its military past.
Our version of intention would certainly surprise the original designers.

Have you felt the power of that arrangement in community?

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

In today's Gospel Matthew has Jesus gifting us not just one parable, but five!

One commentator I follow, noted:

*Ask Jesus a theological question, and he throws a parable at you and then leaves town ...
but he points you to a neighbor, even if they have betrayed you;
he points you to where two or three are gathered;
he points you in the face of the least of these;
he points you to sit at a table celebrating his secular treason and divine resurrection.*

Parables are metaphors utilizing vivid images meant to transcend their specifics, yet they are grounded in a particular time and culture that requires we do some work on their context and intention. Parables may surprise us with their interpretations and help in parsing complex scriptural ideas.

I want to spend the last part of the talk on the mustard seed. The mustard seed parable is in all three synoptic Gospels.

The Biblical mustard tree in Jesus' parable may be unfamiliar to those who know our California mustard. Jesus may have been referencing the *arac*, a small evergreen known across the Middle East as the mustard tree- it grows over twenty feet tall and may be forty feet wide. In its mature state easily hosting birds, insects, and providing a red edible fruit birds enjoy. Its leaves may be eaten and are used in traditional medicine.

By contrast, our California mustard plant is not the same- its yellow flowers produce a chemical that affects germination of other plants, affecting their fire resistance and health of grasslands. It is considered invasive, brought by the Spanish, and can only grow ten feet tall. It can be used as a condiment and has a distinct flavor. But it is incapable of hosting a wide variety of species or providing shade. We need the other image of the mustard tree to understand the power of the parable.

The parable says the seed was sown- if that means *intentional*, then we might gather that the sower meant the field to have an area of shade or attract birds. The crops may not have been as our industrial farming dictates as monoculture- we must delete all weeds- as Alan cautioned us last week. It may have been a more sustainable kind of field that supported multiple crops at once.

The fact the bush was not cut in the parable suggests the larger tree was sought, and suggests from the smallest seed, with time, the larger tree grows. The process is slow and intentional.

Some suggest birds in scripture signify God's grace, divine care or the nations coming under the inclusive intentions of God. Some suggest that growth is divine and confounds our desire for stasis.

An alternate reading, for which I am grateful to Reverend Linzi+, is that the mustard seed was not intentionally sown.

Introduced by the Spanish, California mustard seed was an accident, mixed in with intended seed sown along El Camino Real. It was thus a surprise.

The metaphor now points to whatever intentions we may have; our plans are incomplete, subject to error or intervention. God may surprise us with something new.

In a deeper reading we may be the mustard seed sown within our dominant culture, meant to provide our own surprise to the world. Shaking intentions.

What's Next?

What is next for us as a congregation? As we pass our 25-year point, we have much to celebrate. Materially in the last years at St Ben's, we have a new roof, new solar panels and in the next weeks we will be repainting the building, and in the next month's two pollinator gardens.

We have a human legacy of surviving Covid, rethinking the Abundance Shop, and of superb leadership by Rectors, in my time, Mary Elizabeth+, Caro+, and soon Linzi+.

We have been given a message by Paul that we are already loved by God, and can be fearless as well. We need well-thought-out intentions but should not be afraid to shake them.

A mere building starts like the small mustard seed of an idea and is made manifest- then speaks to us via our experience. It may surprise us with what light and wood may accomplish, and then what we might accomplish through it.

We can shake those literal building intentions and metaphorically grow our experiences in a meaningful way like the growth of the mustard plant into a tree. How far can our limbs reach?

From this wonderful simple spaciousness, we know we come from a presence and love between us. While intentions point to the future, future implies a time that our infinite God already transcends.

God is with us now and will be in what we sense as future and even after.

Nothing can separate us from that love.

We can intend without fear.

We can intend in hope and be joyful in surprise.