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Larry DeLong

Making Peace with Life as It Is - Isaiah 61:1-4

There are three things going at once here in this message today: my title, which could easily lead you to think I'm going to talk how to make the hard parts of life a little easier to take; our lesson, an incredible vision of the prophet Isaiah, which Jesus himself quotes early in his ministry, according to the Gospel of Luke, and says it refers to him; and something about us – meaning VPC – that's been on my heart for a long time.

And, yes, they do all tie together.

Over the six years that I've been among you, together we have gone through unprecedented change. Most of that wasn't planned; much of it ripped through not just through our church, but our community, our region, state, nation, and the world itself. We are not who we were in 2009, are we?

Things have changed. That's uncomfortable for many. There's been a lot of hand-wringing, alarm-sounding, and, I'm delighted to say, prayer and Scripture study stimulated by both the change and the discomfort. This community of faith that we call Valley Presbyterian

Church has been around now for nearly forty years, and it has gone from a church plant that grew like a weed, to the fastest-growing congregation in our denomination at one point in the eighties and one of the largest mainline Protestant churches in Southern Arizona, to a long decline in membership.

What's all that about, anyway?

All of this has certainly been on my mind since I began researching Valley's history before I even considered being your pastor, because that decline has been going on since the mid-1990's. And as anyone paying attention to Christianity in America has noticed, since the late sixties, that decline has been going on pretty much across the board, in churches across the country.

Oh, sure, there are plenty of exceptions – but we're not one of them. We're a big church in a small community with lots of other churches.

We have spent much time – “we” meaning *your* time as volunteers, and staff time, and paid consultant time – trying to find a way to “fix” whatever's going on, so that we can get back up to the fifteen-hundred plus that once called Valley their church home. The question is simple: Why aren't we growing in the one measure that anyone seems to really care about, number of members?

But all along, something else has been happening, something that's hard to quantify, harder to analyze, and except by the grace of God impossible to create: the Kingdom of God has been recognized, and, as best it can be done by people, served.

Which leads me to an encounter I had with one of our family a couple of months ago. He caught me in a hallway, and began to pitch an idea to me, which – as most such ideas are intended to do – would “turn Valley around.”

Whether you've brought such a suggestion to me or one of us pastors or elders or not, you should know that I get a bunch of them. And whether or not they have any chance of success, they are well-intentioned, and I, on behalf of everyone else in this congregation, thank you for them.

But in this particular case, either I was particularly attentive or, as I'd prefer to think, the Holy Spirit was messing with my heart, because I just knew there was something wrong with the whole approach I was being sold.

It all came down to one phrase that kept bugging me long after the encounter, sometimes dozens of times a day.

You've probably heard at least something of one of the great debates in the church, around since the beginnings of the twentieth century. It is all centered on a concept, which, like many really useful

concepts, has both truth and falsehood in it. It goes like this: “The church is a business.”

This is like another phrase we hear a lot: “The Lord helps those who help themselves,” but just like that phrase, has absolutely not one shred of Biblical foundation. In fact, there’s plenty of Scripture to refute them both, no matter how good they sound.

Running the church like a business *is* incredibly important if you are talking about following rules and regulations, caring for employees, and exercising appropriate financial controls.

But the church was never envisioned by Jesus or the Apostles or any of their followers for centuries as anything more than a fellowship of people, existing solely to equip and support believers in Christ for their faithful service in Christ’s name. The church was people, not something that had property, much less a business – at least, as it’s usually presented, a very nineteenth-century and later concept. We may be a corporation, the government says we have to be, but we are not a business – even if we can and ought to borrow from business practices, when and if they can help us be the church without doing violence to following Jesus Christ.

But I digress. Back to that conversation in the hallway. In the middle of this pitch, my well-intentioned sales representative said,

“Yeah, I know business, I was in sales. I know all about that ‘voice of the customer’ stuff.”

The “voice of the customer.” That’s what set my spiritual teeth on edge, but I didn’t know why then, or for some time after. He was talking about the “voice of the customer,” and listening to it.

That bothered me, and it bothered me. Until I asked myself a very simple question, which I’m now going to ask you: If Valley Presbyterian Church is a business, then who are our customers?

Who are the customers of this business? We need to listen to them, give them what they want. Who are they?

That’s it. We only have one customer – or, to be a bit more precise, we have three customers in one. Our customer is God.

This precisely the problem with much of the very hard thinking we’ve been doing for ages. If we’re going to run like a business, then we’d better well know who our customers are, and listen to what they want, what they need, and what they say about what we are doing. God has a lot to say in Scripture about those things.

I’m sorry, folks, but your pastors and employees are not here to cater to your needs as customers, because you aren’t the customers: you, and we, are here together to serve God, and God alone. Your employees

are paid staff: you're the volunteer staff. We're all on the same side of the metaphorical shop counter, working for God.

This isn't a new idea: the theologian Soren Kierkegaard spent a lot of time thinking along these lines, and in truth, it was the orientation of the early church. But with success comes the sense that you've got this, that you know what you're doing, and being humans, we Christians managed to reach *that* point once it became safe to be a Christian in public, back in the fourth century. Pretty much since then, we've been building policy based on being an institution, not a community of mutual faith, support, and service to God.

Now, it may seem like this has been one long scold, or at least a lecture – but it isn't, not at all. More than that, there's a big piece of good news right in the middle of this: somehow, we *are* managing to get something right, just on the basis that God hasn't wiped us off the face of the earth as a Church, capital "C," and because you out there know that somewhere in all this we *are* striving to be faithful to our customer. Every day, this building is filled with people doing good things, working to help others, trying to grow in their faith and knowledge of God, and share that faith and commitment to service with others, seeking "To know Christ, and make him known through word and deed." Insofar as we do that, we're heading in the right direction.

So, what does this redirection mean for us? How shall we then live as a church if, in some ways, our business plan has been out of whack, we've been headed down a false trail? What do we need to do?

Some we've always done and never stopped doing, just what Isaiah identifies and Jesus embodied and expanded: preaching good news to the poor, binding up the broken-hearted, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, serving one another and God's world.

But what we shall have to find out is just how we will serve our customer, God, as the center of our activity. Oh, sure, we've said that's what we're doing, and we have been. But how do we orient ourselves so that *everything* we do is set to making our customer, God, satisfied?

We pastors have already begun working on this. It's a different way of thinking for us, too: not trying to figure out how to make everything we do more attractive to you, the congregation, and attractive to appealing who might just drop in, but instead focusing our effort doing what we can to make you the most effective, customer-pleasing workers for Christ that all of us can possibly be.

The church isn't about numbers, it's about people, individuals. As the saying goes, "God loves each of us as if there were only one of us."

I don't expect this sermon to be on anyone's top ten list, or even for you to like it or agree with what I believe God has called me to share with you today. But I do want you to know that this is the direction we,

as pastors, and our Deacons and Elders, as your spiritual leaders, will be taking as our commitment, our covenant, our deal with our customer.

“Life as it is” has to do with where God has led us. “Making peace with it” has to do with discovering how we can serve God more clearly. And we’ve got a nice, big book to help us figure that out.

And in everything we do and say, we will be striving to serve our Customer: God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.