

Prophetic Multiculturalism: Ten Years On

Preface:

So, again: We're taking some time to look at our Philosophy of Ministry, which includes our Purpose Statement and our Core Values. We talked last week about our Purpose Statement, that articulation of why we exist. "We join together to pursue God's love, become more like Jesus, and build God's Kingdom through word and deed." That's ours.

Core Values are the principles, the non-negotiable things that we hold as most important for us in carrying out our purpose. And every person and every institution has core values. They are either stated and clarified and prayed about or they are unstated, unexamined--but but everyone operates with some set of core values, every body--even the body of Christ.

So, a church's core values are the basic, foundation-level things the church will not give up in its commitment to pursue Jesus. Today we're talking about one of ours, "Prophetic Multiculturalism."

Prayer:

Introduction:

Now: Most churches basically have the same core values, because most of the things that a church can be about can be summarized in passages like Acts 2:42, where we read about how the early church

“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

But how individual churches talk about these universal non-negotiables does differ. The way we describe our core values matters. How we talk about worship, or teaching, or fellowship, reveals our unique characteristics as congregations.

So does the Core Value flow out of the Bible? Of course; as long as the church depends on the Bible. Does the core value flow out of the church? Of course; as long as the Bible guides the church. These two sources are woven together, welded together tightly.

Let me read our Core Value of Prophetic Multiculturalism.

A Read Through:

*A. Smoky Row Brethren Church is a community of persons who come from varied ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. We desire to be a community marked by healthy, integrative **multiculturalism**. This special calling creates special difficulties not always faced by more culturally homogeneous Christian communities. We are, however, committed to working through such difficulties in a way that reflects God’s loving character and is characterized by those qualities with which Spirit-filled Christians are marked (“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,*

gentleness, self-control”; Gal 5:22-23).

B. To this end, our multicultural identity is particularly a **prophetic** one. “Prophecy” in the Bible can be characterized by both “forth-telling” and “foretelling.” Forth-telling involves speaking against the realities of the world in such a way that God’s ideal is clearly articulated, while foretelling involves speaking to the world about the way this ideal will be made real at the consummation of history.

In regard to “forth-telling,” SRBC acknowledges that as God’s special people, formed through Jesus’ faithfulness, we are a community defined primarily by our shared commitment to pattern our personal lives and our church life after Jesus’ own. This commitment is both in **contrast to** and in **confrontation with** our contemporary American context, which divides persons and people-groups from each other based on ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic, and gender prejudices. At SRBC, we refuse to do this. Although we affirm the positive differences between people (many of which are related to cultures-of-origin), we do not condone labeling, prejudicial attitudes, paternalistic or imperialistic tendencies, or other such biases. We support the full participation of women in the life of the church, and join with Paul in stating that for Christians “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

This commitment is in part related to our

*understanding of God's ideal for the world, which is yet to be attained. This is the "foretelling" component of our commitment to prophetic multiculturalism. The book of Revelation speaks of a situation in which those "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues" give praise to God (Rev 7:9). We enact this reality-to-come in the here-and-now by attempting to align our present church life with the revealed future life of God's people. Our church life is a concrete (yet partial) sign of **what will be**, for those who care to see it. We also look to what is colloquially called the "browning" of the United States, and acknowledge that the future of the U.S. is one in which our country becomes a place of ever-greater multiculturalism—a change that has already begun to occur in our neighborhoods. We affirm this as a positive development, and we want to act as agents of positive change in this process.*

C. In light of all this, those of us who are English-speaking, American Caucasians confess the special privileges we have enjoyed as members of the majority culture, as well as the often-unconscious sense of entitlement we sometimes have had. This is particularly true for the males among us. Those of us who are outside this majority culture acknowledge our need to trust our "insider" brothers and sisters and teach them about our backgrounds and life situations. All of us commit to using our gifts and passions to

support the work of SRBC, regardless of the differences we might have. In fact, we believe that the differences among us can be translated into incredible blessings for SRBC and those we interact with!

Prophetic Multiculturalism: The Best Picture

Wow, right? That's us? Have you ever looked at a picture of yourself that is just really, really good? You've got it as wallpaper on your phone or something because, you know...you look great. And it's definitely you; but you know that you don't usually look that good. That's how we relate to this Core Value, I think.

Or consider this: I would much rather have Carolyn than a picture of Carolyn. And this picture of us at our best...well, it's two dimensional, it's flat. But it reminds us of who we are and it invites us to become more truly and more fully ourselves as Smoky Row Brethren Church, to creatively work toward becoming prophetically multicultural in everything we do.

And it says so much, right? Let's talk about what it says, what the core value reminds us about ourselves and calls us to:

Prophetic Multiculturalism: A Community Of Prophets

Prophetic Multiculturalism reminds us that we are a community of prophets. We are a community of prophets. And we do what prophets do: We speak

against the ways of the world that are out of sync with God's rhythm, and we speak about the things to come, so we can prepare ourselves to act like Jesus when they arrive.

The things we speak against are clear: the fragmentation of humanity, the fragmentation of our churches, the tendency of the world to separate and segregate out people into groups. We are led by the truth that "Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all." We are led by the truth that Jesus can unite and gather in himself all our differences, and that he provides for us a unity that makes our differences not sources of division, but sources of strength and insight and collective power.

When we speak about the things to come we speak about Kingdom Come as Revelation puts it, New Jerusalem as it's framed in that last book in our Bibles. We speak about the lives we'll lead there, open-gate lives, where those "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues" join in and worship our shared savior. Until that Kingdom "comes on earth as it is in heaven," we model this world to come that we'll live in, by getting as close to it as possible in our own congregation, and being open to the ways God can make us more like who his people will be. And we speak about what's happening around us right now: the the neighborhood of our church is far more multicultural than it was when this building was built.

Columbus, Ohio, the United States; we are becoming a more multicultural place.

And whenever that happens, the majority population freaks out. Hear me, here: as our neighborhoods, and work places, and country becomes more and more multicultural a place, the majority--in America's case, middle-class white people--are going to freak out.

Look, our most recent years in America have been ones of radicalized hate crime, of pushbacks on all political levels against the things that have come as, basically, white people lose the societal power we once had. Nothing in our children's world, in our world, is untouched by these issues right now--even rich people, who are usually able to buy their way into places that can be untouched by societal issues--are finding it hard to do.

Whenever some group gets nervous about people different than them, it's called "xenophobia," which means in Greek "Stranger Fear," "Fear of Foreigners."

But we, Smoky Row, we speak, prophetically, shaped by the Bible, that the Church is a place that loves the stranger, the alien, the widow, the orphan--the ones who have no advocates in our society, outsiders. We are "xenophiles," we're like "foreigner lovers," "outsider lovers." We know that "them," they aren't the threat--they are the ones God called us to love, just like Jesus died for us. In fact, you know that "Jesus

died for us while we were yet sinners,” right? The word there, “armartoloi,” is a word that was used as shorthand for gentiles, because gentiles were the ones who were the sinning outsiders. Jesus died for us while we were yet outside the camp, outside God’s People, sinners. But Jesus was a “foreigner lover,” and we say prophetically we are too; and Smoky Row is a place where bridges are built between those who are different from one another, and harbors are carved out, shelter is given, to those “sinning foreigner outsiders” who need it.

Do you get this, this prophetic vocation that we have as the unique church we are?

And if God swooped his fist down through Columbus and gathered up his churches in his hand, and sorted through them--you know, getting the silver change, looking for wheat pennies, whatever--what he’d find is, basically, a bunch of pennies. Most churches have the same core values, whether those are stated or unstated, explicit or implicit. Our Core Value of Prophetic Multiculturalism is one of the things that makes us silver change, makes us a steel penny: this leads us to have a core value that many, many other churches do not have. And with all special gifts, it is to be nurtured, and guarded, trained and taught, protected, lest we misplace it like the widow who lost her coin.

Prophetic Multiculturalism: Many-Cultured

This core value also reminds us that we are on the path to becoming a community of many cultures. And this gets tricky to talk about.

Often, when the issue of diversity or multiculturalism comes up, what can happen is that if a bunch of people are more or less the same, and they're discussing this stuff, they begin to highlight the differences that they have within their similarity. Does this make sense? The group is more or less similar with regards to the color of their skin, the level of education that they have, the financial class they are in--upper or middle or lower--their backgrounds, their political affiliations, culture of origin, view of the world, you know: in most ways the group is similar.

So groups like this tend to highlight little differences. Nothing is wrong with that. People are different: we all have different wounds, we all have different fears, we all have different interests, and all the rest. But within groups of people that are more or less the same, what's focused on is the smaller differences that they share. This is reasonable and there is nothing immoral about it, and no matter what group we find ourselves in, this sort of thing happens in some form or another.

But because of our history, our calling seems to be something different, something where the differences among us are larger, are more on the surface, are at the level of language, occupation, education, wealth, race, nationality. God did something at Smoky Row

that no one expected; he sent us a wily Guatemalan, who worked to develop an entire Spanish-speaking congregation at a time when few had one. Rudy continues to nurture Latinx community throughout Ohio through RED Pastorage. We've hosted an Arabic service. Both our tenants are minority-led and minority-reaching congregations. Our Community Garden and Food Pantries are sustained through non-white participation.

And God continues to make us uniquely positioned to move forward into this picture of ourselves; uniquely positioned to engage a changing society around us, and I think uniquely positioned to condemn the growing xenophobia and racism that really is getting worse in our society.

And yet, we ourselves, as a congregation--basically a bunch of white people. And we have got to own that. Even though we are all unique, we're also primarily middle-class well-educated white people. So...look.

Our Core Value of Prophetic Multiculturalism is not achieved in us yet. And that's good in a lot of ways. It drives us forward. But one thing we need to consider is how we are going to make ourselves, Smoky Row Brethren Church, more like who we say we truly are? We've done very, very good at living up to this Core Value and being directed by it in some ways, but in this way, like all Core Values, we're judged and found needing to do more.

Prophetic Multiculturalism: Privilege & Power

Because this core value reminds us that some of us are privileged. We are privileged. It's simply the fact that being a white male in our society is, in terms of getting through life, an easier deal than anything else. And male means an easier life than female, and white means an easier life than asian, and asian an easier life than black, and black, than hispanic, and of course I am oversimplifying things here, right, and not being nearly as nuanced as most of us would like me to be. But some of us start closer to the finish line than others, not because we earned it, but because a racist world moved others starting places behind us.

See, we remember at Smoky Row that with privilege comes power--power to move more freely in a society, to meet more easily our needs and the needs of others--that with privilege comes a greater urgency to use our privilege not for our own interests, but for the interests of others. When any of us find that we are in a privileged position because of something that we were simply born into, we use what power and freedom that privilege brings to better others, not ourselves.

Sorting:

Humans are sorters; it's what we do. We sort. And we sort people. And we sort them first by what we see: skin and clothes and hair, what they've got in their hands or the cars or stores or neighborhoods we see

them stepping out of.

And after we've sorted them we pile on top of them all sorts of expectations and assumptions that we've picked up along the way about that skin, those clothes, that hair; about their food and their drink and the stuff in their hands, about the cars and stores and neighborhoods we just know define them.

We move from the things we see or hear to the things we associate with what we see and hear. And most of the time, you know, the associations we have just aren't fair. They aren't true. Stereotypes are mostly like the little step that I have to take to get down into my garage; I never open that door to stand on that step; it's just a thing I use to get to where I'm really going.

And we have to remember that living prophetically multicultural lives means we never rest on that step, we never sit with our stereotypes, we never grip our assumptions and our expectations. At best, at best, any of these are things that we pause on for the briefest second on our way to where we're going. It's even better when we're so busy racing to where we're going that we skip the step.

And where we are going, what we're trying to be, is an agent of Christ, together, who heals the fragmented, broken, divided world. Prophetic Multiculturalism like our core value talks about, at its very best, is healing

medicine.

The world is broken enough. Churches don't need to shatter it anymore. We are the only hope that the nations, the tribes, the tongues, and the peoples have of truly knowing each other, because what binds us is outside the brokenness of the world, what ties us to one another is the blood of the Lamb, the name of the Lord: Jesus, Jesus who binds us together, and opens up the eyes of his followers, that they may see that what is most true about others is not that which we see, but that "in Christ there is no longer" that which the world divides along.

And now this is the part of today's message that, honestly, is a little smelly. It's a little musty, you know. Because to really be Prophetically Multicultural we must do some things.

Must: Patience, Prayer & the Long View:

We must be patient: This is a work that takes more time than you have. This core value is true of us, but it is not fully true. And we know it. We have to own that, or we fail being true to ourselves.

We will be that community that unites people the world says cannot be united. And as we work to this, God is blessing us in realizing it. But we are not working just for ourselves, right? We are working toward the church that Smoky Row will be decades down the road. And so all our efforts in being

prophetically multicultural must be done with patience, with prayer, and with the long view in mind. We are talking about becoming a sort of church that is difficult to become well. But many, many years from now people will be grateful that we did not give up pursuing this particular call of God on our church's life. You are building a legacy; and we don't do that without prayer, and patience, and a long view in mind.

Must: Exchanging Expectation for Anticipation

We must exchange any expectation we have that church should be a place where people are shaped like us, are like us, for the anticipation that church will reshape us, change our likeness into Jesus' own.

Church trains us to expect things, you know. The unspoken sermon that many churches send every single week is that "Your way is the best way, the people who agree are the best people, and the ones who are unlike you are less than you...because of course, if they weren't, they'd be here, where all the "right," "good" people are."

But the Church fails us when it trains us to think that what we should expect from the Body of Christ is an affirmation of our sensibilities and our preferences. That's a failure.

It is very hard, in a society that is as fractured and fracturing as ours, to both embrace everyone and condemn those who believe some people are better

than other people. We want to be nice and accepting. But prophets condemn. And so do we.

Some Things: Remembering

And if Smoky Row is to be a place of prophetic multiculturalism, we must not forget that we are a place of prophetic multiculturalism.

We can't forget it. We have named it; and we can't let it go unspoken or unremembered.

Look...COVID dealt us blows. When's the last time we sang in Spanish? When's the last time we saw Spanish on our screen? When we're in a time of caution, we don't reach out, not well--and most of us who already mostly have friends just like us have spent over a year hanging out with only those who are on the inside of our inner circles. That doesn't leave much room for the stranger, especially the stranger from another culture, whose dress and language and expectations and personality are so different from ours.

Will our next year be one of clawing back caution's degradation of this value we have? Or will we slide into complacency?

Conclusion:

The world says "Divide, divide divide!" Against this, we remind each other loudly enough for the world to hear us, "Cling together, hold to one another, let love train us to value the differences that we see."

You do not have a sharp knife if you only use one grit when you sharpen it; and if we are going to be sharp enough for God to use us in his healing surgery of the world, we cannot rest until we are gathered with others who are unlike us, and because of it, can sharpen us so so sharp, that Smoky Row cuts out of the world it's great lie--that division can lead to unity, and fragmentation to wholeness.

If we are privileged, we've got to use that privilege to lift others above us. We must speak against the world's lies and call them to the truth of the world to come, to the truth of the power of Christ, who is all and is in all, taking with him the walls and hostilities, fears and protections, that separate us one from another.

And we must not forget who God has made us to be. What are your ideas, here? What should we do? What must we do in order to be true to who we are? It's not just up to me, you know? And we can't have Rudy carry this load for us. We can't sublet it to our tenants, and pantry people and gardeners. May God breathe on the very strong embers of this Core Value and may we see, sooner than later, the way we light up the world with our prophetic multicultural fire.