

The Great Unraveling and the Great Re-Weaving

Every once in a while, I will find a loose thread on my shirt or on my pants. My first reaction is to pull on it and remove it from my clothing. I have had a few times where instead of removing a short piece of thread, I pulled and pulled and pulled and ended up removing a much longer piece of my clothing than I really wanted to. I once saw a picture of a blanket that had unraveled into a “half blanket” with a large pile of yarn on the floor. Once you start pulling on a thread, it can unravel faster and longer than you might wish!

As I read the news in the paper and on the internet, I get the sense that a lot of our culture seems to be unraveling around us. We hear about national, state, and local governments that are cutting budgets and services to needy people. We hear about an economic recovery which seems to be a “jobless recovery”. Companies seem to be doing better, but they are not hiring workers back at the rate we have come to be used to in coming out of a recession. Our unemployment numbers remain stubbornly high. We are rattled by assassination attempts on government officials. We used to live in a 40/40 world – where many people could work 40 hours a week for 40 years and receive a good pension. Those days are gone. The shifts taking place in the global economy and global communications are changing our world and we are rushing to keep up to figure out how to respond.

We see this Great Unraveling in the church, as well. Most of our church structures were designed for the modern world we used to live in, not the post-modern world we live in now. Some churches became very good at appealing to consumers by offering religious goods and services, but now the demand for those markets seems to be drying up. We spent our time studying what to do with people after they visited our churches, but now church visitors are becoming rarer, and our attempts to attract them seem to fall on deaf ears. We became great program operators, but now fewer people seem interested in pre-determined church programs that already claim to know what they need. North America is once again a mission field, and churches are discovering how very difficult it is to do ministry in this environment. There are no technical “quick fixes” that will “save the day”.

What happens when our church and culture are both experiencing The Great Unraveling at the same time? We often see a rise in the level of people’s anxiety and uncertainty. We see an increased level of conflict and “picking on each other”. We see churches laying off staff and encouraging sub-performing staff to move on sooner than they would have before. The tension level seems to rise.

Without sounding over simplistic, I believe that God is alive and active in the midst of The Great Unraveling and is knitting the Church back together in the Great Re-Weaving. When a blanket unravels into a pile of yarn, there can be some sadness and a sense of loss that the favorite blanket has been lost. But, it is also a time of great opportunity and creativity to see what kind of sweater or clothing can now be created out of all this newly available raw material. When the world seems to be falling apart around us and ending

up in a big pile of yarn, God does not simply walk away and close the door. Jesus Christ is right there in the midst of everything, beginning to re-weave, re-shape, and re-form the old blanket into a new sweater, a new set of drapes, or something yet to be discovered.

One of the keys for those of us in the church is to develop our missional imagination about what God might be calling us to be and to do in this new place and time. What is God up to already in the neighborhoods around us? What does God want to do? How is God wanting to re-shape and re-form Christ's Church to move into the new opportunities that are springing up all around us? What new skills do we need to develop? It calls us to learn how to discern the movement of the Trinity around us. It requires us to re-establish the spiritual habits and practices of the church of ages ago – dwelling in the Word, prayer, fasting, hospitality, caring for the widows, orphans, strangers, and the needy among us.

It can be hard to move forward when we are focused on the sadness of the beloved blanket that has unraveled. But, as we catch a vision for the re-weaving that is going on around us, as we see that God is inviting us to join in the Spirit's work of re-creation, our imagination can begin to see new opportunities, new possibilities, and new options for ministry that are right under our noses. We live in a time of Great Transition as we see both the Great Unraveling and the Great Re-Weaving taking shape. The scriptures reassure us that God is not finished with us yet. The work of the Spirit is alive and well in our world today. We may see the forms and shapes and structures of our church change. But, if we see that Christ's ministry is continuing in ways we had not imagined before, we can begin to see the place where Jesus is inviting us to participate in the Great Expansion of the Kingdom of God.