

Trusting in the Slow Work of God: Becoming a North Star Community

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 October 2024

Preachers: Tonetta Landis-Aina, Anthony Parrott

[0 : 00] Will you pray these words with me? Words that were written by theologian Teilhard de Chardin. Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet, it is a law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability and that it may take a very long time. And so I think it is with you.

Your ideas mature gradually. Let them grow. Let them shape themselves without undue haste. Don't try to force them on as though you could be today what time.

That is to say, grace and circumstances are acting on your own goodwill or make of you tomorrow. Only God could say what this new spirit gradually forming within you will be.

[1 : 13] Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you. And accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.

Amen. Now, if you have been around me for a little while, you might have heard me start a gathering or sometime at my house with that prayer.

And if you haven't yet, you probably will at some point. It's one of my favorite prayers because it asks us to acknowledge what often feels painfully hard to admit.

Growth and change are usually extremely slow. We often have to wrestle with our impatience, our boredom with the middle parts of the plot.

Even though those parts of the plot are ultimately what drives the story and gives it meaning. We often have to contend against the desire for control and neatness and our desire for a straight, uncomplicated line from point A to point B to point C.

[2 : 27] Yet Christian formation does not work like that. And neither does the healthy formation of Christian community.

We are always instead asked by God to trust in the slow work. The work that often happens underground in the nourishing dark.

Years ago, maybe a decade ago, I somehow acquired this book called Slow Church. And in it, the authors see Christopher Smith and John Patterson use the paradigm of the slow food movement.

To urge followers of Jesus toward a model of church that intentionally disrupts our culture's obsession with speed and with standardization. The authors cite the work of George Ritzer, a sociologist who is known for defining this term, this term that he coined McDonaldization.

McDonaldization, he says, is based on four principles. Efficiency, predictability, calculability, which means you can quantify it, and control.

[3 : 42] The point that the authors of Slow Church drive home again and again is that in a world where we are being constantly formed in the belief that anything and everything can be commodified, we must not commodify our life together.

We must seek avenues of counter-formation and counter-liturgy, which reminds us that what we are doing together in this room is about communion rather than consumption.

It is about the slow work of God. Now, I want to start here today because Anthony and I were wrapping up this series.

We're going to co-preach today. We're wrapping up the series we've been in for the last five weeks. We've been exploring the marks or the characteristics of a liberating church using the work of Brandon Rensher and Vanika Williams and a head of a school of scholars and practitioners down in North Carolina.

We talked about Ubuntu, the Southern African philosophy that holds a person is a person through other persons. We talked about how to interpret the Bible in ways that are liberating.

[4 : 58] We explored the liberating power of unspeakable joy in a world that gives us so many reasons for bitterness and cynicism. And then last week, we lifted up the black spiritual All God's Children Got Shoes to help us remember that a liberating church is always leaderful and activating the gifts of every single person present in the room.

All of these characteristics emerged from reflecting on a model of church that is alternative and resistant to the status quo. The hush harbors that enslaved African folks, African American folks created outside and off of the plantations of their masters.

Today, as we get into the final mark of liberating church, I realized when I was writing and thinking about this, that I was feeling particularly sensitive to how overwhelming all of this can feel and how uncomfortable it can be.

And so I just want to remind us again that our call is always to trust in the slow work of God among us. Last year, around this time, October, Mish, Anthony, and I went to a conference that was out in Denver.

And it was at the end of the first night. We were at this, like, beer garden kind of thing because progressive Christians, y'all love a beer garden. I just tell you, every conference features a beer garden. I don't even drink beer. But anyway, so we're at this beer garden thing.

[6 : 29] And at some point, this guy comes over to me and he, I mean, it felt like to me, I felt cornered. And he asked me basically, like, how can you read and preach the Bible?

I mean, it's caused so much harm. Like, how can you continue to do that? And, you know, I felt like I was having a hard time articulating what I wanted to say to him.

I was kind of taken aback by the reality that a good answer to that question seemed, like, so impossible to him. And I felt like underneath his question was really this other question, which is really, how can you say a Christian?

And what I wish that I had said more clearly that day is that my faith has survived and my faith has been energized and is daily energized.

Because of liberative pockets of Christian community that have always, always, always existed in the tradition. North star communities give us coordinates in the night sky pointing the way to freedom.

[7 : 37] Communities like the ones that monks formed in the deserts of North Africa during the early years of Christianity. Because they understood that authentic Jesus following could not, could not coexist with the Christianity of Constantine's Roman Empire.

Communities like the underground seminary that the great theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer helped start in Germany when Christianity and Nazism were becoming extremely cozy.

Communities like the communities like the communities like the communities like the communities like the community. Communities like those that were found throughout Latin America in the 1960s. Base communities of often poor people who met together to study the Bible and meet each other's needs and just create a kind of cogent analysis of their social reality and how they could resist the dictators and oppressors of their day.

And yeah, communities like the hush harbors of my own ancestors. These were all communities that no matter how fierce they're resistant to trust and be formed in the slow work of God.

My deepest hope is that the table church can become, in our own way, in our own place and time, a North Star community just like those.

[8 : 57] A community that prefigures the coming commonwealth of God. In writing about this mark of liberating church, North Star, here's what Brandon Rencher writes.

The North Star signified any collective, personal, mundane, and dramatic actions enslaved Africans took that resisted and built alternatives to the status quo.

That demonstrated their agency, dignity, potential, and aliveness amid the death-dealing plantation culture. He and Williams elaborate on what that means for modern churches in this way.

Building a North Star community is an ongoing journey of learning, unlearning, and relearning. It requires practicing radical hospitality by being a vital part of the organic community organizing and activism in your city.

Building toward the North Star means practicing radical hospitality by opening our spaces to concerned community members. It means to celebrate the arts.

[10 : 09] It means to celebrate the arts and to practice storytelling, speak to justice issues, and ultimately to build community together in a sea of loneliness. And if D.C. is not a sea of loneliness, I don't know what is.

These are just small contributions to the larger work of creating new maps with ancient coordinates that lead to liberation. Now, when I was reflecting on this mark of North Star and thinking about our church, a really simple scripture came up for me.

A scripture that kind of floated to the surface this summer as I was studying Ephesians. And hopefully it's something that you can hold in your heart and consider this week and consider as we start to move out of the series.

Ephesians 5, 1-2 Therefore, imitate God like dearly loved children.

Live your life with love following the example of Christ who loved us and gave himself up for us. He was a sacrificial offering that smelled sweet to God.

[11 : 19] When I think about what it means to be a liberating church and what it means to become a North Star community, I think that this simple verse speaks volumes.

Simple. First, imitate God fiercely. In the ancient world, a primary way of instruction and learning was through identifying a model.

Someone to model yourself other, following a model. Parents would have been considered primary models to imitate. But one might also apprentice themselves to a master of a particular craft or to a school of a particular perspective or to a beloved teacher or scholar.

And as a church, we've talked about having to consider our models that reflect our perspective. But I also don't want to leave this series without saying that we all, as individuals, have to search for our own models.

So who is your sensei when it comes to faith? Who is the person for you that can say, wax on, wax off, wax on, wax off?

[12 : 37] And you actually do it. You'll actually say, this person, yes, this, yes, I will wax on and wax off. Who are you trusting at that level with your spirit?

And this verse, while it reminds us that we need models, it also reminds us that our first model is always God. And if that's the taste, then one of the most important things we can do is to simply know who God is so that we can imitate them.

To know God as much as possible beyond the false distortions and images of God that are so easy to receive. To be reminded of the God who will only be finally named as I am, who I say I am, is the free God.

The one who can never be contained by our modes of transactionalism and coercion and violence. And we're to imitate God. You've got to know who God is.

Now there is an old hymn I first heard as a child that reminds me of this. It goes, and if there are any singers that want to help me hear. I woke up this morning with my mind.

[13 : 55] Fade on Jesus. I woke up this morning with my mind. There you go. I wanted to go, but I was scared. Okay. Thank you, Becky.

I tried to practice, but Lord, y'all, I'm not a singer. Now, what is interesting about this song, and I think, Becky, actually what you picked up here, is that whoever kind of made, was working with this song or thinking about this song.

Also, I'll say it like this. In the black church tradition, another way to sing this song is, I woke up this morning with my mind. Stayed on freedom. Freedom.

Freedom. And whoever made that switch to the song understood that Jesus and freedom were inseparable. That to talk about one is to talk about the other.

I knew the God of freedom, the God that we are called to imitate. Second, imitate God as dearly loved children. Imitate as those who know themselves as lovable and worthy and given dignity by God.

[15 : 01] Imitate as those that know they are not machines. That know they are not brands, but rather divine images. I'm not going to go too far in that direction because Trevor hit that up deeply last week.

But I just want to affirm that North Star communities are full of people who are learning to relax into the presence and love of God in tangible ways. Relax.

To abide and to rest. And then finally, live your life with love. Ephesians talks a lot about love.

And there's a prayer in Ephesians 3 that I really, really enjoy. It says, I ask that Christ will live in your hearts through faith as a result of having strong roots in love.

I ask that you have the power to grasp love's width and length, height and depth together with all the believers. I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge.

[16 : 10] So that we will be filled entirely with the fullness of God. It is so easy for love to become synonymous with a fluffy feeling that is really hard to define.

Or that maybe we never define. But loving well is a serious thing and it's a serious call. In our book, all about love, Belle Hooks describes her frustration with not being able to find clear definitions of love in our culture.

And after a prolonged search, she describes finding one definition that she really liked. It's a definition by M. Scott Peck, who wrote *The Road Less Traveled*.

Here's what he says. Love is the will to extend oneself for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.

Love is as love does. Love is an act of will. Namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice.

[17 : 22] We do not have to love. We choose. Liberating churches, North Star communities take learning to love seriously.

They don't assume it. Instead, they recognize that many of us maybe didn't have great models of love. Maybe we had great models of terror. But not all the things that make up love.

Liberating churches recognize that we're still learning how to love. To take up, as Hook says, all the ingredients of love. We have care and affection and recognition and respect and commitment and trust and open and honest communication.

Liberating churches are training schools in those ingredients. And I hope that we are becoming that kind of community. And then there's one final thing to notice.

The verse that comes before Ephesians 1 and also ends kind of the latter part of Ephesians 5, 2, which is on the screen. Those portions are all about Christ's own expressions of love that inspire us to love.

[18 : 33] His forgiveness inspires our forgiveness in the midst of conflict. His self-offering invites us to open up to one another. His love with even his enemies lets us know that for any love to be worthy of the name, it must embody a cross-shaped tenacity.

And a hope for the resurrection. To be a North Star community takes vision. And it's a vision that unfolds at Jesus' speed. It includes some really boring things.

For example, some of the nuts and bolts of our vision for the next season include things like having at least three months of savings in the bank. Closing the gap between our expenses and our income.

Strengthening our volunteer capacity and widening the quote-unquote front doors of our church so that people can find us. And closing the back doors so that people don't slip through the cracks. And all of that is a middle part of the plot that will ultimately drive our story and give it meaning.

It is also the slow work of God. Even as we talk about work that is slow. One more thing came to me and that was just something that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, who worked with Dr. King, amazing human.

[19 : 54] He said that a prophet always knows what time it is. A prophet always knows what time it is. So to be a prophetic North Star church, we have to know what time it is.

So to help us consider that for our own church, Anthony's going to come up. I want us to turn our attention to one of the parables of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 13.

Jesus said many things to the crowds in parables, and this is one of them. A farmer went out to scatter seed. And as he was scattering seed, some fell on the path and birds came and ate it up.

Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't that deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants.

And they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. And the thorny plants grew up and choked them. And other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit.

[20 : 56] In one case, a yield of 100 to 1. Another case of 60 to 1. Another case of 30 to 1. And Jesus concludes by saying, everyone who has ears should pay attention.

Now, we don't have the time to go into all the facets of this parable. I want to focus on the seed that fell on good soil. One of our values as a church is rooted improvisation.

And if you've been part of this community at all, you know that we lean deeply into the improvisation side of things. Oftentimes, we're forced to.

My first two years as your pastor, we were dealing with a pandemic that just wouldn't go away. We lost spaces. People in the city move in and out. Our own families had to sort of juke and jive as we've dealt with finances and illness and things like that.

But as Tanetta and I have prayed and talked together, what we're sensing is it's time to focus on the other half of rooted improvisation. The rooted half.

[21 : 58] In order for seed to grow and to bear fruit, it has to put down roots. It has to sink down and stay put. I know as a kid who went through the foster system, who moved every few years, there can be this itch when you stay put for a while to be like, all right, time to uproot, time to blow everything up.

I know military kids feel this. Anybody who's had a life where you move around a lot, where you bump up against, like, this is the longest I've ever been in one place. I must change everything.

And I think it might be time to sort of resist that temptation that I know I can feel and I know this community can feel. It's been pointed out to us more than once that this church continually can feel like a startup, a little chaotic, a little slapdash.

We've been in D.C. bilingual on a weekly basis for less than a year. Our evening service went through a three-month pause and is trying to get itself sorted out again.

And Tanetta and I are wondering, what if the call is to stay put? As much as it depends on us, as much as we have control on it, what if the call is to stay put?

[23 : 10] Now, I know a vision-casting sermon of let's institutionalize isn't the most exciting thing. But we see in Jesus' parable that rootedness is where growth and bearing fruit happens.

I'm reminded of Paul's words in Colossians 2. And see those pairings of words.

You're rooted so you can be built up. You're established so that you can overflow. So we don't want to be just rooted as an organization. Yes, it'd be really good to have more than one month savings in the bank, to not just be like one month away from disaster at any point.

But we also want to be rooted as people, as disciples, as followers of Jesus, as Christians. We don't want our faith to be merely defined by all the forces that are out to hurt us and harm us, that cause us to perhaps initially grow up in that rocky, thorny soil.

We don't want our faith to be defined by that. We want our faith to be rooted and built up and established in the love of Jesus as dearly beloved children.

[24 : 28] As a pastor, it's kind of weird that I probably don't say this enough out loud, but I'm going to say it now. I really love Jesus. Like, I really do. And I want a pastor in such a way that leads all of us to really love Jesus, to be loved, and to love God with passion and intimacy and mercy and grace, and to not be ashamed of that.

Which, speaking of not being ashamed, leads to the last point of this sort of vision-y sermon that we're giving. So the word broadcast, we now associate it with, like, media, television and radio and live streams and things like that.

But before the 1930s, before it got associated with media, it actually was an agricultural term, and it came out of English translations of the parable of the sower. The earliest usage of it was about the sower who broadly cast the seed.

And I think what we have here at the table is special. We have a worship team filled with some of the most talented musicians who deeply care about you connecting with God. A preaching team who knows what it means to study scripture and communicate it in a way free of shame and condemnations.

A kids team who wants to raise up kids who don't have to, like, radically deconstruct their faith. A first impressions team that, like, wants to feed you and take care of you. A justice team that wants to see the city changed for the better.

[25 : 49] There's not a lot of churches that you're going to come to that aren't going to pray against the killing of innocent lives in Gaza and Palestine and speak in tongues on the same Sunday, right? We share a gospel that's perhaps more beautiful than what a lot of people have ever heard before.

And I think people should know. So, in the name of broadcast, we're going to be putting in some effort into a couple things. First, we want to share the fact that we are not ashamed of Jesus and the gospel that we preached.

We want to make it clear in our teaching and our preaching and our classes and everything that we do that we are rooted in Jesus and a gospel of liberation and freedom because Jesus and freedom cannot be separated.

And we also want to broadcast in the way of getting the table's name out there. Now, I personally, I get the ick from a church spending money on advertising and social media. And yet, one of the most common things we hear from folks is, I didn't know you existed. I didn't know a church like this existed.

Now, I live and breathe the table. I know it exists. But most of the population of the DMV doesn't. So, we're going to be putting some money towards ads and Instagram and putting some money into, like, getting out into some outreach things in this city.

[27 : 03] Tanetta and I are going to be spending our hours, like, writing and posting about this more beautiful gospel that we so deeply believe in. We want to make our presence known. And more importantly, not the table's presence, not the table's name, but the name of Jesus known in this city.

So, with all of that in mind, we're going to spend a couple minutes to give you some time to sort of meditate, think, think about implications. You're going to put the implication questions on the screen. We'll play a song.

You can, you know, pick up your phones or your journal and think about a couple questions. Are there any ways that God might be calling you to a season of rootedness? As you think about the many, many ways that our society and our culture is always pulling us towards change, towards, you know, always doing the new thing, novelty.

Are there any ways that God's spirit might be saying, what if you put down roots? Are there any ways that God might be calling you to a season of broadcast, of not being ashamed of the gospel, of not being ashamed of Jesus, not being ashamed of collective liberation, of what it might mean for you to share that more broadly in your life?

Are there any ways that you might contribute to this church's financial stability and our volunteer base? Are there any ways that you could help push open the front door, the ways that people find the church through our groups and our justice and compassion ministries and through our Sunday services, as well as narrow the back door to make sure that people don't get forgotten, don't get missed.

[28 : 36] And then finally, sort of for all of these questions, there is a what is there to say yes to and what is there to say no to, what is there to start and what is there to stop. So I'm going to invite our AV team to play this song, invite you to prayerfully meditate, write down some ideas, and then we'll move into a time of communion.