

Part 11: We are a courageous conference.

Peter Sjöblom has worked as Director of Congregational Vitality for the Central Conference for that last decade to assist congregations in transition as well as helping them to move toward a more healthy and missional approach to their unique calling.



Because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land...

These are interesting days for the church. We've heard reports of this disillusioned "post Christian age" where folks no longer are seeking meaning through institutional religion. The church struggles for answers.

As Director of Congregational Vitality for the Central Conference, I've noticed an increasing anxiety on the part of established congregations which are experiencing the disequilibrium of a world which doesn't work the way it used to. Many of us experienced the most compelling times of vitality in the 70's and 80's when people seemed to flock to our churches. We got older, and our children, somewhat more critical than we were, haven't found the identity of the "tribe" quite as nurturing as before.

Just recently, reading through several stories in Numbers, I was taken by the sense of turbulence created in the wilderness wanderings. Chapter 13 accounts the spies being sent into Canaan to see if it was as good as was promised. All the spies came back saying to Moses that the land was what was promised but... 10 of the spies gave scary reports of the land. "It devours its inhabitants", they said. "Huge, really huge people in there." "We can't go against them." "We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes." An old pastor friend once said, "When you think you're a grasshopper, you're a grasshopper!"

But, in chapter 14 we are told that Caleb had a "different spirit".

The "spirits" are not named. All we know is that Caleb (and Joshua) had a "different" one than the spirit which gripped the others. The story itself leads us to some conclusions. The word "anxiety" comes from the Greek word "Ananke", the god of constraint who presided over slavery. Constraint was accomplished through a tight yoke or chain which constricted the throat, limiting one's movement. Anxiety is always accompanied by constriction. (Think of angina, the tightness of arteries which produce pain.)

Generations of slavery in Egypt had produced a population of Israelites whose collective memory was only such a yoke. All that was needed was an alarming report to send them into chronic anxiety.

Whether experienced as individuals, or in collective groups, when anxiety becomes chronic we lose the ability to think in creative ways. The only way we can function is to go back to what we

know. And that was the collective “spirit” of Israel. The yoke of slavery continued to accomplish its purposes even though Israel was supposedly free from that constriction. “Let’s get some new leaders who will bring us back to Egypt,” they cried.

Would it be safe to say that the “different spirit” attributed to Caleb was “courage”? The passage tells us that it allowed Caleb to “follow God wholeheartedly”.

Caleb was not in dread of major obstacles. Caleb was not sidetracked by exaggerated fears. Caleb could engage the promise of God. Caleb could dwell in the new land. Caleb seemed to invite adventure. Caleb could see creative options. Caleb could see the salvation of the Lord.

The Central Conference has a wonderful history in leading some of the most creative enterprises in our denomination. Though the fight continues over which was the first official Covenant church, beyond a doubt Princeton, Galesburg, Rockford, and Chicago were all early influencers in the building of this movement.

This focus on mission has resulted in thousands of people coming to Christ. The disenfranchised finding a place of care and concern. Covenant Home was founded for the elderly. Covenant Children’s Home in Princeton assisted many families and children as orphans. Swedish Covenant Hospital has promoted commitment to health and wellness. More recently enabling residences have provided assistance for those struggling through various disabilities. These and so many others are an outgrowth of gospel compassion.

In the late 60’s and early 70’s, we entered the land of racial righteousness. In many cases as white congregations fled the cities to suburbia, several congregations in Chicago made decisions to stay and become more reflective of the changing face of the communities they served. I feel I could name so many more ways congregations have stepped up to a courageous representation of the Kingdom of God. We are indeed a courageous conference.

Bible Study

Questions:

1. Try to put yourself in the place of the Israelites in the wilderness. What “spirit” was in place that romanticized the yoke of Egypt? What are ways we are subject to that same spirit?
2. Why do you think Caleb and Joshua countered with such a different version of what they saw?
3. How would you define the present situation or context (spying out the land) for your church in this day and age?
4. Have an honest conversation about the anxieties that your congregation currently faces?
5. How do we experience the role of the Holy Spirit in helping us courageously face our current challenges?