

Comfort Zones

Mark Fredenburg
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Okay today we are going to learn about the difference between bond polarity and molecular polarity so we can gain a better understanding of the physical properties that arise due to molecular structure and the unequal sharing of electrons. What? That isn't what you came here for today? But that is what I am comfortable talking about.....Chemistry and atoms and molecules and stuff.... What am I going to do with all these worksheets and these molecular model kits? I feel like I have been deceived I see this was simply a ploy to get me to come forward and now that I am here, it is like one of those bad dreams where you find yourself in class ready to take the final exam and suddenly realizing that you don't know anything about the content, the teacher, fellow students etc. Have you ever had one of those dreams? How did you feel? Did you find your heart racing? Was the frustration building, sweat forming on your brow as the test was handed to you? How could this be? Why am I not prepared and..... why am I naked? Then you wake up.....ah it was just a dream, but no less real as you still recoil from the anxiety of your phantom experience.

Now you know how I feel standing here before you! Yes, I have spoken publically and sure I have my students in front of me daily as I spout important scientific formulas and theories, and yes, I have even had the honor of presiding at this table on Sunday mornings, but this is different. I am now being asked to make myself very vulnerable as I walk away from my own comfort zone and preach. It is a bit intimidating and even more daunting as my role in this church has changed almost overnight. It seems I have gone from an "Indian" to a chief....and the decisions that I am now part of, have much more weight as indicated by the letters and emails of support and concern for this church that I have received recently. So I am going to try to belay my fears and just tell you one man's view from this lofty pulpit.

As I have witnessed the incredible relief effort going on in Haiti, I get chills running up my spine realizing that people have given up their time, money and energy to help those that they do not even know. More so, they have rolled up their sleeves and done the "dirty work" necessary to save lives and put this dilapidated country back together. The one question that constantly haunts me

is....why does it take a disaster to make this happen? Sure there have been financial efforts and churches have traveled to help the people both physically and spiritually in the forms of missionaries and other support groups, but not until the direst situation occurs do we see this kind of response. However, when the need does arise, I am glad that the faithful do come running from every different direction. On the other side, did you notice how vibrant the victims were even in the midst of destruction? I saw one lady singing as she was being pulled out from under the rubble! You just get the feeling that their spirit, faith and energy will allow them to rebuild and move forward. The people that make up this community will not let this tragedy change who they are.

It made me think of what might happen if First Christian Church met a similar fate...for instance, what if there was a fire or if the roof collapsed during a storm? How would we respond? In this day and age, perhaps we would assess the damage, call the insurance company and then look into the rebuilding process. However, this only takes care of the physical structure? Will we continue to meet? Will small groups become organized to help with the clean up process? Do prayer groups arise and engage in Bible studies? Who takes charge? So many questions that we didn't think would ever need to be answered. We would be put in a situation that is far from our normal comfort zones.....I remember seeing a story on the news about a church in Maryland. The building had caught on fire on a Friday evening. By Saturday morning the only thing that was left was an empty shell and some smoldering remains. The media arrived at the site on Sunday morning to see how the people had responded to this terrible event. I am sure they were expecting members to be crying or consoling each other during this time of need, instead I remember seeing the Pastor holding their service outside in the parking lot as if nothing had happened. They were all there worshipping just like any other Sunday. After the make-shift service, the Pastor was interviewed about how they could continue without a church, I remember his simple reply...he said "but don't you see? The building burned down, the church still lives."

Isn't that what we are hearing in the Bible? We are the parts that make up the body of Christ. We have our own gifts to offer that leads to strong and vibrant church community. The people make up the church, not the sanctuary, fellowship hall, classrooms or offices. I pray that we will never have to undergo an experience like the one in Maryland, but maybe we can learn from it and the

spirit that was unified, renewed and refreshed. Is it too late for us all to chip in and make our church a better place just because the building still stands around us? Or can we summon up the energy to fill vacant roles? Are we willing to support existing programs and activities in our church? God wants us all to work together so that others will hear the Good News. For us to continue to grow as a congregation we need to make our church a place where people want to come because our enthusiasm for doing God's work. If we continue to build our own spiritual foundation and show our love for God and each other, people will want to be a part of it.

When I was young I would go outside my door and listen for the hustle and bustle of kids playing in the neighborhood. There was so much to do, you didn't know where to turn....would I catch frogs at the creek, ride bikes, play ball....the energy of having fun was all around. I was always drawn to the biggest crowd because that meant there must have been something big taking place. Being part of a group that was having a good time was contagious. You didn't have to be invited, and you were always welcome. The lesson I learned from those early years is that people want to be involved with groups that are active, perhaps through a cause or common interest. As we grow older maybe frog hunting becomes caring for animals that are facing extinction, or bike riding becomes a Walk for the Cure or building go-carts becomes Habitat for Humanity. If we continue to build our own spiritual foundation and show our love for God and each other, people will want to be a part of it.

Let me share with you my early experience at First Christian Church. My first day here was just another Sunday of searching for a new church. We had tried the UCC down the road, but didn't care for the absence of instrumental music. As luck would have it, this Sunday worship service was being followed by a pot luck supper. I can remember racing toward the door trying to escape feeling guilty that we did not bring anything to share. After all, it wasn't fair to eat to those that had contributed to the dinner. We had only been with these people a few hours and didn't even get to greet too many as the group moved into Fellowship Hall rather quickly. We had nearly made it to the double doors in the narthex when we each felt an arm upon our shoulders, "where are you going in such a hurry? We have plenty for everyone. Come in and get to know us better". The invitation was great, but the people buzzing around, talking, laughing It was clear that we wanted to be a part of it. But what was it? We didn't know

anything about Disciples of Christ and had only met a few people, but the energy was too overwhelming to resist and we were hooked.

After being in the church for a couple of years, I got a call from Noble Wrinkle, an elder in the church, who asked me if I would be interested in becoming a deacon. I was curious so I asked him about the qualifications for the role. He started out by telling me that I couldn't rabble rouse anymore and perhaps I could have a glass of wine every so often. Was I deacon material? Before I could interrupt, he continued to inform me that I had to fulfill 2 out of 3 possible duties; my choices were to serve communion on Sunday, prepare communion for one month per year or be a member of the calling tree. And then, just to make the position absolutely irresistible, he added that I must become a member of a department, which meant becoming a member of the Board. Wow, had I really made it? A member of the Board? I was really excited because ever since I had come to First Christian Church I had seen the columns of names of every elder and every deacon listed on the back of the bulletin each Sunday. Now my moniker would be proudly displayed as well. I chose to work with membership that year. I noticed that I was one of 10 persons in attendance at our first meeting. The chair explained that we had all basically signed up to provide refreshments for special occasions and sometimes stand outside the sanctuary to greet new folks attending church. One of the more experience members always worked with a newbie to break them in. We were not even the largest department that year. After all, the Board consisted of all the deacons (17 per year serving a 3 year term), all the elders (6 per year serving a 3 year term) and other Board leadership positions, not that dissimilar to our current roles. In case you didn't bring your calculator, that was 51 deacons, 18 elders and others, totaling over 70 persons and each one had an assignment with a department. Now I realize that having a Board of that size would not be a reasonable expectation for 2010. But it gave me the idea... what is to stop us from having every member of the congregation participate at some level? You don't have to be on the Board to "play". You don't have to hold a major position or even be a leader of a council, committee or team. We just want you to be involved in your church. The degree of participation is not the important factor rather that we have created a place for you to plug into the church and its activities and programs. The end result is that you find something that fills you with the energy to do God's work. But you have to own it – not have it thrust upon you.

Let me share an experiment I did with my students the other day....I asked them to listen to a set of sentences.....Harold Herring Liked.....the puzzled looks

that I am seeing now were identical to those of my class. The first letter or letters of each of those words represent the first 20 elements on the Periodic Table. I made up this silly verse when I was challenged to memorize the symbols. One of my over-achieving students was already starting to memorize the phrase when I told him that it would be much smarter for him to come up with his own phrase. He responded by asking why he should come up with his own, when I had already created one that had worked since I was in middle school. I told him simply that it didn't mean anything to him. He did not own it, so it was like learning two things instead of one. The same is true of participation in church. You need to find that thing that really gets your juices flowing. If there is something that we are doing that excites you, please join in the fun. On the other hand, if you have another interest, you should run with it. How many great ideas die in the livingrooms of our homes? You know the ones I'm talking about. Instead of wondering why someone else isn't doing something, why don't we just start the ball rolling? Or we used to do such and so, why don't we do that anymore? How about this..... Let's say that you have an interest in photography and that you think others might be interested as well.....you dream about the day that a group gets together to discuss pictures that are meaningful to the photographer. Discussions soon surround the majesty of God and how your picture actually means more than the paper that it is printed on. Contests are created to encourage more people to join in. Kids don't want to be left out, so they are encouraged to display pictures that they see representing God's love.....well you can see that this little germ of an idea, just sprouted into a real community of spiritual growth. Do you have an idea? Don't let it die in the living room.

Finally, if we want to grow, we must hold ourselves accountable to each other. We should be proud of the things we do. At our school, we have framed graphs on the wall that show the test score progress from 2000 – 2009. This is not to "show off". Although we have made great strides, there are still some areas that demonstrate a need for improvement. The message being sent is not one of vanity rather that we are accountable to our community and want to show them that we are making efforts to get better each year. Why don't we display our different programs in one single place so that anyone who sees it can find a place where they can make a difference? Perhaps on a bulletin board.... we can show existing groups and activities and places where anyone can jump in to help or participate in some capacity. Maybe, there could be a space for new, creative and exciting ideas to be displayed, welcoming anyone to join in. Visitors would

look at our montage of action and become intrigued by the possibilities. It could happen.....

One of my favorite quotes comes from Albert Einstein – it is his definition of Insanity....doing the same thing over and over and expecting to get a different result. Let's stop the insanity....It is time to breathe new life into our body of Christ. We need to be involved, be passionate about our work and above all accountable to God's Kingdom.

Now don't get me wrong there will be times where the work of the church will force us from our comfort zones. What happens when there is conflict in decisions to be made? What about those times when we don't feel like participating? I suggest that when we leave our comfort zone, we stop, take a deep breath, pray a short prayer and enter God's comfort zone. He is there to take care of us and help us discern his plan for our future.

I need to be honest with you, these last few weeks have been a little rough. Many of you have placed your trust and faith in me so much that I am honored to serve you. However, I have learned one very important thing over my short tenure as Board Chair, I was slipping out of my comfort zone. I thought that because of my honed processing skills, I would be able to move the group forward by holding efficient meetings ending in a timely manner, my likability as a member of this congregation, and the leadership skills that I have acquired in my professional life. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I thought that the experiences I had up to now had prepared me for this job. But I was wrong.... So I took a deep breath, calmed myself and realized how much you and God mean to me. The strength of this church resides in the relationships that exist here. It is the trust we have in one another and the ultimate goal to further God's kingdom that is important.

If I could take the liberty to modify Mary Stevenson's poem, it might sound something like this.....

One night I had a dream--
I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord
and across the sky flashed scenes from my life.
For each scene I noticed two sets of footprints,
one belonged to me and the other to the Lord.
When the last scene of my life flashed before me,
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.
I noticed that many times along the path of my life,
there was only one set of footprints.
I also noticed that it happened at the very lowest
and saddest times in my life.

(When I was out of my comfort zone.....)

This really bothered me and I questioned the Lord about it.

"Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you,
you would walk with me all the way,
but I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life

(when I was out of my comfort zone)

there is only one set of footprints.

"I don't understand why in times when I needed you most,
you should leave me."

The Lord replied, "My precious, precious child,
I love you and I would never, never leave you
during your times of trial and suffering.

"When you saw only one set of footprints,

(I brought you into my comfort zone)

it was then that I carried you."

May God's peace wash over all of us in 2010.