

“Celebrate the Journey”

Romans 12: 1-21
“Deepening the Meaning of Church”
By Thomas Moore in *The Soul’s Religion*

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Later this morning as we join together for our annual congregational meeting I am going to reflect back to you what the Session has learned over the past three or so years of our journey together. I am going to try to capture what we believe God is saying to us. We all know the facts of our situation: Eastminster has endured an almost 40-year period of decline from 450 members in 1972 to 38 members today. Our scout troops will tell you the same story of troops in years past that had dozens of members to a mere handful today. Elks Lodges, the Lion’s Clubs, and other service organizations tell the same story. Each year it is becoming harder and harder for us to maintain our buildings, provide education, sponsor activities and worship together.

But, there is deeper part of our story. We are not the only church with these issues. In fact, among Presbyterians and other mainline congregations it is a common story. In our presbytery we have 120 churches and exactly half, 60 of them, have less than 100 members, and are declining rather than growing. After the article came out in the Portland Tribune nearly a month ago I had four churches immediately contact me. They all told the same story. A number of their members brought in the article, pointed to it, and said, “*They could have just put our name in place of Eastminster and it would have been our story.*” Two churches said it led to engaging discussions during fellowship and in Session meetings.

What I want to say today is that all of this provides us with an amazing opportunity. My friends, we are being watched with how we handle this pregnant moment. Other churches are seeing their story unfold before them through our story. Other churches are watching closely because they wonder if they are getting a glimpse at their own future. Peter Korn, from the Tribune, met with me last week and has committed to checking in again in about a month to see how this story is going to unfold.

Today, I want to just reflect on a few lines from our scripture and our reading from Thomas Moore. I don’t really have a formed message so much as I have a few lines that I believe inform us in this time.

The first comes from Romans 12: 1, which reads this way in the translation called *The Message*. “**So, here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life...and place it before God as an offering.**” The Revised Standard Version reads this way, “**I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.**”

This just stood out like a neon sign when I read it in the context of this 13-week period of discernment. My friends, we are beyond trying to “save” Eastminster, so to speak. We are beyond trying to recreate the church of the past where we can expect to fill our Sunday schools with children laughing and running down the halls. We are past the point where the answer is as easy as saying, “*We just need to work harder and give more money.*”

We have come to the point, and maybe this is what Alcoholics Anonymous teaches, where all we can do is let go and trust. Some people call that hitting “rock bottom”, that stage that is needed before true growth and healing can happen. In our lesson from today it is so beautifully put, “**So, here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life...and place it before God as an offering.**”

It's one thing to say those words when we are doing well. It's a whole other thing to hear them when we have nothing left to lose. My friends, I think we are at this wonderful, scary, hopeful place now where all we have left is to say, "*Whatever life and vitality is left here at Eastminster is going to be an offering to God.*" We aren't going to do things because it promises us growth. We aren't going to try to reach certain target populations because it will lead to more stable finances. We are going to sing and pray and worship, we are going to be Eastminster simply as an offering to God...and then "what will be will be." God will do what God will do.

The second verse that I want to highlight feels like a breath of fresh air to me. I wonder if it is going to feel like a breath of fresh air to you as well. This is a little preview of our conversation later this morning. I really like the way *The Message* translates Romans 12: 5. Paul writes, "**So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts of Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't.**" One of things that the Session clearly heard is that Eastminster is tired and the majority of us are at an age where we don't need to be on the front lines of reforming the church. Most of you are at an age where you should be able to enjoy the fruits of your labor. You built this church and now deserve to enjoy the care, compassion and love that comes with it.

When I made my opening comments at the Dessert Conversations I led you through a sheet that showed our progress at redevelopment. If you remember right I showed how over a seven year period we were attempting to bring two different and unique communities together. Little by little we have been pushing Eastminster to think and look more like the "spiritual but not religious" Portlanders while also massaging those folks to appreciate and understand our traditional religious life. But, if there are ten steps to meet in the middle we have only completed three or four of those steps and we could expect another few years of pushing Eastminster to act and think more like the younger generations we had hoped to attract. And quite honestly, this is exhausting, difficult work. It's difficult for you. It's a struggle for the Session. And it can leave the congregation feeling pushed too hard.

Our text today is a wonderful reminder: "**Let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be...without comparing ourselves to others...and trying to be something we are not.**" We will talk about this in our annual meeting, but there was agreement that we are who we are. We aren't those folks out there. We have certain values and ways of worshiping that are important and sacred to us. And to give those up is to actually lose a major piece of who we are. Our scripture says essentially, "*Take a big deep breath. Don't try so hard to be someone else. God made you just like you are. Be who you are and let God do the rest.*" I don't know about you, but that feels like a big blast of fresh air. Maybe we need to quit trying to so hard to be something we are not.

The last phrase I would like to highlight is one that I find personally powerful for me. Thomas Moore, in his book *The Soul's Religion* talks about the need for both personal expressions of spirituality and religious institutions. He writes, "*Personal religious inspiration and institutions call each other into being. They are two sides of a coin....Placing these two dimensions of the religious life in opposition betrays the fact that both are currently on shaky ground.*"

I think the reason this line is so important to me is that I have found myself for years living in the uncomfortable and awkward space between our traditional religious structures and the emerging spirituality of society. Thomas Moore is right, I believe. The church is on shaky

ground, but so are the young and unformed new expressions of spirituality. Up and until now we have often seen these two expressions of spiritual life as competing with each other. The church often calls the new forms heretical. The new spiritual communities dismiss the church as a lifeless, empty shell of a once vibrant life.

My belief is that the church of the future isn't going to be the church as it now exists. It also isn't going to be a copy of some of the new emerging spiritual communities. It will be a new form of religious community that will come out of the dialogue between the two. It's not going to be one or the other. It will form out of the common life that emerges out of the marriage between our traditional structures and emerging forms of spirituality. This is what I and the Session want to invite you all into in the coming months, and hopefully years, if God grants us that much time. Many years ago I heard God's call to me to live in the space between, to act as a bridge between religion and spirituality.

Thomas Moore writes, "*We are always reforming our vision, always refining our practice, always trying out heresies—deviations from the direction we have found worthy of our belief. These are all signs of life*" that could be fostered in our religious institutions.

My friends, we are participating in one of those pregnant moments in history. I don't know what Eastminster is going to look like in five years, ten years, or thirty years. I do know, however, that we have an opportunity to make our church an offering, a living sacrifice to God. This is not about saving the church. This is about seeing the moment at hand. Dan Fogelberg has a great line in *Run for the Roses* which is about the Kentucky Derby. He sings, "*It's the chance of a lifetime in a lifetime of chance.*" This is our moment right now. This is our chance of a lifetime. Something new is being birthed in history right now. If we try to hold onto the past we will get left behind. If we try to push too much into the future we will lose who we are. This is about being who we are right now and offering our lives and our church up to God.

I have lived in the space between traditional religion and today's emerging spirituality for almost twenty years. From my vantage point the church needs the vitality and the creativity of our new spiritual seekers. But, just as much they need the church for the depth, history and connection to our ancestors that we offer.

Today, the Session wants to invite you into the next chapter of Eastminster's story. Let us become a living sacrifice. Let us offer up to God our life, our history, and our ministry and see what God decides to do with it.

The Session is convinced that God is not done with us yet. Let us continue to celebrate our journey with God.