

Gap, Thunk, Grow... Becoming Community
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Psalm 51:1-17

Sometimes there's a "thunk" when a person that I've recently met discovers I'm a Minister. Typically, I do not wear a clergy collar. So when I attend social gatherings and the topic inevitably turns to what we all do for a living, the "thunk" usually happens. It's a palpable, unmistakable change in the dynamic of conversation. Whoever I am talking to suddenly goes silent, as they think up an explanation for why they no longer go to church or apologize for how many drinks they have had or the curse words they used during our conversation. Sometimes it's just easier to say that I work for a non-profit, which is not entirely untrue! At least that gives me a chance before being entirely dismissed.

I know it's not just me... any Christian, not just ordained ones, can experience the "thunk". Go hang out where people don't go to church on a random Sunday morning. When you get there, start throwing around the words "Christian" or "church," and see what kind of response you get.

I think we can blame the "thunk" on a credibility problem. Christians are often thought of as bigoted, judgmental, uneducated, backward people. And "church" is often thought of as the place where we narrow-minded people gather to reinforce our stereotypes and point condemning fingers at those outside our walls.

You know this is unfair. Not all of us are like that. We know that a different Christianity exists, one that is stronger than the widely-publicized brand that so many people find anti-scientific, homophobic, imperialistic, defensive, condemning, rejecting, and afraid.

We know that there are followers of Jesus who are open-minded and well-educated.

We know that there are followers of Jesus who are spiritually mature, intellectually honest and psychologically savvy.

We know that there are followers of Jesus who guard against unfair stereotypes and work to eliminate prejudice wherever they see it.

But there are lots of people outside of Christianity who are not aware such people exist, because we who practice the faith with our minds, hands and hearts fully engaged have become the minority.

Sadly, the Christianity that is most widely publicized is the flavor of that smacks of fundamentalism and the impossible logical fallacy of Biblical inerrancy.

The “thunk” is caused by a “gap” which impedes our ability to meaningfully engage people outside our walls. The reasons for this “gap” are multi-faceted, but at the risk of oversimplifying, it exists for two reasons.

Number one, as I've already mentioned, is that the Christian faith has been hijacked by those who created a reputation that we do not want and that is difficult to overcome.

Secondly, the “gap” that gives rise to the “thunk” exists because there are so many people who have been hurt by those who practice Christianity. Some of these walking wounded are still in church, but most of them are not.

The phenomenon is often called "religious wounding" by mental health professionals. As a pastor and as someone who on countless occasions has had first-hand experience with both the “gap” and the “thunk”, it is something that I can't avoid talking about.

When I mention it to people outside the church, there is often a deep resonance and understanding, followed by an expression of gratitude that someone recognizes and attempts to take responsibility for the pain religious communities have inflicted, often unintentionally.

At every stage of life, we humans are in the process of unfolding. If we're truly alive, there is always some new part of us longing for

expression. When that tender new growth collides with faulty religious teaching, and when it is squelched or snuffed out or damaged or broken, a religious wound is often the result.

All any of us really want is to find a faith community which nurtures our growth and loves us as we grow into our best selves. When religious teaching thwarts growth instead of promoting it, when it steps on human blooming instead of tenderly nurturing it, trauma is the result. Allow me to offer some brief examples.

When a person languishing in a loveless or even an abusive marriage sits in worship and hears that divorce is always wrong, a wound can be inflicted.

When a woman or a girl begins to hear a voice calling her to ordained ministry as she simultaneously hears from the pulpit that women cannot be pastors, a wound can be inflicted.

When a faithful person struggles with poverty but is taught in church that material wealth is a sign of divine blessing, a wound can be inflicted.

When a young person struggling with gender identity or sexual orientation hears from his faith community that straight is right and gay is wrong, a wound can be inflicted.

When a smart kid experiences cognitive dissonance because her clear and accurate logic about how the world works runs counter to what she has been taught in Sunday School, a wound can be inflicted.

This is why people outside the church can get a little nervous when they're around us, that's where the "thunk" originates. There's a "gap" between us and them, because they think that we're backward and blind, and some of them have been sorely hurt by religious people who have stepped on them instead of helping them.

But I have some good news. We can do something to close that "gap" and lessen the effects of that "thunk".

We can begin by distinguishing ourselves from stereotypical Christianity. Not every Christian is a Bible-thumping, backwards-looking, gay-fearing, others-condemning, science-rejecting, bigoted, close-minded person. It is our call to step outside that stereotype and get our message of God' Great Love out. Here's how we do it.

We can **acknowledge** that religious wounding exists. We can talk to those people, both inside and outside the church, who struggle with self-limiting thoughts or feelings or behaviors because they've been injured by oppressive and faulty religious teaching. They're out there.

We can **apologize**. Not every Christian community has inflicted religious wounds, but like it or not, you and I are associated with ones that have injured people. It is past time for us to stand up and apologize for the ways in which Christianity has been hurtful. Taking responsibility for the harm that has been done in our name will go a long way toward cushioning the "thunk" and shrinking the "gap".

Not only must we acknowledge and apologize, we must **articulate** a Christianity that is smart and kind, that is honest and in touch with the scientific and historical discoveries, that is sensitive to cultural shifts and that is life-giving and logical and really good for people.

It is time to articulate a faith that is focused on just actions and not on right beliefs, that acknowledges that Charles Darwin was correct, that moves away from original sin and blood atonement and back to the just and ethical teachings of Jesus, that regards Jesus' death as a sign of human blindness, that approaches the complex issues of gender and sex with understanding and sophistication, that employs the best of scholarship to read, understand, and apply Scripture, that gets its head out of the sand and turns to the issues that face this world, and that helps move us towards meaningful participation among all the peoples of the world.

I was in a conversation recently with a young adult who grew up in the Church, and here's what he said to me. Are you ready? "My generation has no use for the Church."

When I asked him to tell me more, he touched upon some of the issues already mentioned. But foremost for him, (and, by the way, he is straight), is the refusal on the part of many communities to accept the various ways in which healthy people express their love. Injustice toward gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons must stop. In addition to being just wrong, it also seriously impedes our efforts to share the Good News.

And that leads me to the next thing we can do, and that is to **act**. Not only can we **acknowledge** our role in the “gap” and **apologize** for our participation in the hurt and **articulate** a smart and kind faith that really works in this world, we can act to bring to an end any teaching or policy that damages, squelches, or thwarts genuine human blooming.

Speak up. Think creatively about how you can be an instrument of change. Resist injustice and oppression with your voice, words and actions. This will not only help to bring healing to those we have hurt, but it will also bring us closer to the same kind of ministries of love and justice that both Jesus and the Hebrew prophets who came before him practiced.

Next, we can **advertise**. Get to know people who don't go to church. After all, that's what Jesus did. And when you find them, tell them there are faithful people right here who fully understand that we live in a post-Christian world characterized by globalization and scientific discovery who still believe that Jesus is worth following!

And remember this. Not everyone with whom you share this good news will enter those blue doors. That's not the point of your sharing anyway. As a result of your enthusiasm, some will come. And I hope they will. Not because we in the church can get them cleaned up and straightened out, but because they might be able to help us get our act together.

And prepare to be **astounded**. When the people who really love Jesus get really smart, and radically and extravagantly kind and

welcoming to all people, then we will have the opportunity to establish the kind of community that can turn this world upside down.

We can live out the kind of justice and mercy that Jesus said is what this life is all about. If, as we like to say, God's love is unconditional, then we can do nothing else. Building that kind of community will be the reality to which Jesus pointed in the prayer he taught us all to pray: God's will done on earth. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.