

January 2023



From the Bishop:

More than twenty years ago now, when I was serving in a congregation, I sat with a woman who was dying. I loved this woman. Her name was Bobbie. She was fierce and funny. She was smart. She could be a little intimidating. She was a tall, big woman who pounded her cane into the ground as she walked. Throughout her life, like most people, she knew grief and joy. Disappointment and surprise. I was honored to hold her hand and sit with her as she took her last breaths.

As pastor, I have had the opportunity to sit with many people as they are dying. It is one of the most holy things a person can do. There is truly a thinness between what is and what is to come. While there are many things I love and miss as a congregational pastor, one of the top absences is being invited into people's lives as they leave this world and enter into God's presence in the company of all the saints.

Recently I attended a three-day retreat with several bishops and leaders from the western part of the United States. Most of what we talked about and discerned was what it means to be church today. Included in the conversation was how to journey and accompany congregations that are dying. This retreat wasn't a "how-to manual" of what to do. Instead, the intentional prayer, singing, worship, and community led us to sit in the same "thinness" feeling that I mentioned above: what is and what is to come.

As we sat in both the grief of some of our congregations closing and in the anticipation of what God is calling us towards, one person made the comment, "There is Spirit-led death and then there is just death." I've been pondering about this statement since it was said. What does it mean to have a Spirit-led death? What does it mean to just die?

Perhaps we can use Bobbie's death as a guide.

I think back to Bobbie who I met with many times before she died. She made it clear to me what her wishes were for her funeral. She talked many times about how thrilled she would be to see her husband again. (Her husband died when he was twenty-eight leaving her with two small sons.) She was looking forward to resting. She wanted to make sure that I knew how glad she was to not be a burden any more to her sons. She had hopes for the assets she was leaving behind and how they would be used to further her passions. Most of all, she was excited about what was next for her – she talked quite frequently about the questions she was ready to ask Jesus.

In the weeks before Bobbie died, her sons called me to ask if I would be available to sit with Bobbie when she died. They lived far away and knew that they might not make it to her bedside in time. I, of course, said yes. When the nurse called me, I went.

In Bobbie's last hours on earth, I was with her. I felt God's holy presence as I held her hand, sang hymns, prayed the Lord's prayer, shed tears, sat in silence, loved her, and was present with her and Jesus in the thin place between life and death and resurrection.

Going back to the retreat that I was at and the questions that arose, I wonder how we can have language to talk about some congregations having Spirit-led deaths. While I hope and pray that all congregations thrive and grow, I also know that there is a life cycle for all things. And I want to be able to live in the thinness between life and death and resurrection with all of us in the Northwest Washington Synod. I want to have the hard, deep conversations that need to happen. I want us to talk about looking beyond survival and instead talk about death and resurrection. How can we do this in meaningful ways? How can we do this before there is a sudden death? How can we do this acknowledging the pain and heartache and also living in faith and hope?

We in the synod office want to journey with you in these conversations. It is not easy and it is not wanted. But it is a time that can be holy and where God's presence is made known.

As this new year begins, may we walk together in the Spirit – placing our hope in God through Jesus. May we journey as resurrection people.

+ Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee

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From the VEEP

I've been thinking a lot about labels lately. In particular, I've been thinking about the labels on the spices in my pantry. During the pandemic, my wonderful spouse took on all the cooking duties and moved the spices from an eye level shelf in the pantry to a drawer in the kitchen. While that makes them much handier to the cook, it is impossible to see the labels on the bottles. Pulling open the drawer merely reveals a panorama of identical lids. For convenience, I've started putting little round stickers on these lids with the names of the herbs and spices held in the jars. This way, I don't have to pull each bottle up out of the drawer, one after another, to find the nutmeg. I do still have to be careful, just in case the lids get mixed up, or the labels have been dislodged. I do check to make sure I haven't confused the cayenne pepper with the cinnamon. We have some unlabeled items in our pantry as well, and I must exercise extreme caution before using them. I almost used a cup of a white crystalline substance in my cookies, but luckily, I tasted it first and prevented a *very* salty mistake.

All of this preoccupation with labels has led me to an epiphany of sorts regarding how we label God, ourselves, and others. Labels are handy things. As noted above, they prevent confusion and help us to use the right seasonings. We all carry many labels, some more useful than others. I have had many labels over the course of my life, some for the roles I play (mother, teacher, sister, daughter), others for some aspect of my physical being (short, multiracial, female), and still others for what I believe (Christian, Liberal). Sometimes those labels have changed (parent, educator, sibling, child), even when I have remained the same. Labels can change to be more specific or more general, but the salt is still salt, even when it is sea, or kosher, or rock.

Think of all the labels we have for God: Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Prince of Peace, Lord of Life, Alpha, Omega. So many labels that do their best to capture different aspects of the divine. Zora Neale Hurston, in her book, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* says of God, "Here we done found out about the one true God. The others been grabbing hold of little parts of Him and calling all of them parts a god by itself. It's like calling each limb of a person a man." Just because other people label different aspects of God with other names, it doesn't make God any less God. God is all those things and more. When Moses asks God for God's own label in Exodus 3:13, God's response is "I AM WHO I AM" (though a footnote indicates the verb tense could be shifted to I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE). As beings created in God's image, maybe our label would best be WE ARE WHO WE ARE, rather than whatever label we give ourselves or other people want to give us. How do we better allow ourselves, and others, and God to simply be what we are without trying to put that vastness into some small spice bottle? After all, the sugar is still sugar, even if I label it salt. It is what it is. God is God, I am who I am, you are who you are, and we are all going to be what we will be. Blessed Epiphany, everyone! May it be warm and well-seasoned!

Here's what I or the Synod Council have been up to in December:

- I attended the LiVE retreat, "The Spirituality of Waiting" on December 3.
- I continue to attend the Synod-wide Acts Bible Study ([learn more here](#) and drop in any time!)
- Executive Committee met on December 14. Among other agenda items, we discussed plans for the Synod-wide Gatherings coming in May

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