

This past weekend Michel and I attended the Yearly Meeting ministers and Mates retreat, where we heard Jim Newby talk about healthy ministry and healthy faith communities. He reminded me about a point that Harry Emerson Fosdick made many years ago, when he compared two bodies of biblical water.

“The Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea are made of the same water,” Fosdick wrote. “It flows down, clear and cool, from the heights of [Mt.] Hermon and the roots of the cedars of Lebanon. The Sea of Galilee has an outlet. It gets to give. It gathers in its riches that it may pour them out again to fertilize the Jordan plain. But the Dead Sea with the same water makes horror. For the Dead Sea has no outlet. It gets to keep.”

It must be six years ago that I first read those words, but I’ve always remembered them, and since this past weekend, they actually kind of haunt me. Newby used them because he was talking about four different types of faith communities. He spoke about thriving, maintaining, surviving, and dying congregations. Each type of congregation, he said, has a few keywords and a question that is central to everything they do.

For the thriving congregation, key words are growth, vitality, and confidence, and the central question is, “In everything we do, how can we draw people into the God movement?” The key words for a maintaining congregation are contentment and sustainability, and the central question is, “In everything we do, how can we keep those who are now members content?” It doesn’t take much projection to see that a congregation that is maintaining itself may also be a little like the sea with no outlet. Sooner or later it’s going to start dying.

Well, I’ve been putting those thoughts together with a passage that occurs in several of the gospels. I’ll read it here from Matthew:

Matt. 9:35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. 36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; 38 therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

I’ve been thinking about that passage because, in a way, what Fosdick was saying, what Jim Newby was saying, is that to thrive and grow, both personal and in community, we need to join the harvest.

That’s a hard thought for me, in some ways, because, to be honest, I have a hard time with the word “mission.” Mostly because it has so many connotations for me of beating people about the head and neck for their beliefs. But harvest is different, if I think about it. Harvest is more like the Church of the Brethren mission statement.

I love the COB mission statement. It’s about as concise a statement as I think you can make about why we bother to gather, as Christians, into something called a church. This is how it goes:

Continuing the work of Jesus. Simply. Peacefully. Together.

Continuing the work of Jesus. Simply. Peacefully. Together.

That’s the harvest I can work in, the harvest I can join—the harvest we have to join if we want to thrive: Continuing the work of Jesus. Simply. Peacefully. Together.

What is that work? As I’ve suggested before, I think it might be possible to fit all of Jesus’ work, and all the works of the apostles, into one or several of these categories: the work of teaching, the work of healing, the work of hospitality, and the work of generosity.

At a more homely level, we might pay particular attention, within those categories, to one anothering and to friendship. Because what I’m saying, not

very clearly, is there isn't just the work; the way we do the work is also the work. Simply, peacefully, and together is also the work.

To get right to the heart of the matter, there are ways in which the work of this meeting is falling apart. Not enough people have too many responsibilities which they are too over-burdened to carry on their own. Some of you need to sit in the shade awhile, but you can't do it until others of you come into the field. And I know that for one reason or another others of you just can't join the work. Even so, I keep thinking about the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. I spend a lot of time thinking and praying about this. I have no answers for how to make it better.

But I cling to the image of the Sea of Galilee. To be a channel, to empty ourselves: in their own way, these are gifts. They are the gift of purpose.

To join the harvest is to realize that God has called us to the ranks of the givers, to those who are given gifts in order to pour them out again. To join the harvest is to live in the certainty that we have a purpose, and that our purpose is a verb, that our purpose radiates out from ourselves. When I say that our purpose is a verb, I don't mean to suggest that those of us who build shelters and care for the sick are more purposeful than those who study and pray. What I mean is that a life of faith is acknowledgment, in its own individual way, that pouring ourselves out is our natural destiny. It's what we're here for. To do together. Like the Sea of Galilee. I don't know how. But I hope we can.