

The Thread We Follow
by Mahan Siler

Micah 4: 6-8
Luke 4: 16-21

Circle of Mercy
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The infamous Yogi Berra, when he was manager of the NY Mets, after another loss of many, gathers his team together in the locker room, holds up a baseball, reminding them, “Now, this is a baseball!” Yes, during a down and difficult time its good to be reminded of the basics.

When I became pastor of my last congregation, a church with almost a hundred years old, a wise friend said to me, “Mahan, your challenge will be how to lead from the past.”

So tonight let’s go back to the basics, let’s revisit our past for some wisdom, let’s grasp again the thread we have followed. This thread goes through our larger family --- the United Church of Christ and the Alliance of Baptists. Think of it this way: you likely have uncles, aunts and cousins, especially second or third cousins, that you have never meant or justbarely know. So see the Alliance and UCC as distant relatives. Tonight I have been asked on this 30th anniversary to connect us with the Alliance thread --- not as information (that would be boring) but as inspiration and support.

THE WAY IT IS

There is a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn’t change.

People wonder about what things you are pursuing.

You have to tell them about the thread.

But it is hard for others to see.

While you hold it you can't be lost.

Tragedies happen; people get hurt

or die; and you suffer and grow old.

Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.

You don't ever let go of the thread.

William Stafford

The thread? Micah 6:6-8

The thread? Luke 4:16-21

A few years ago in an annual Alliance gathering I read this poem and I raised the question --- so what's the thread we follow? What's the thread that doesn't change, the thread we must hold lest we get lost?

I wondered out loud with that Alliance gathering, maybe the thread is being a people on the move, an "Exodus people" as one founder dubbed us. So in 1987 about twenty of us, including Nancy, and Ken in spirit, said let's move out and away from our Southern Baptist family who were turning toward fundamentalism. Let's affirm, say yes to what they are denying: yes to ordaining women, yes to the larger ecumenical community, yes to the separation of church and government, yes to the imperative of social and economic justice, yes

to scholarly approach to scripture. As a small band --- with no by-laws and strategic planning in place --- we set out with only these covenant affirmations to see who might join our movement. As one founder put it: “Let’s put up the flag and see who salutes!”

And the Alliance keep moving out, moving out into ever widening circles — welcoming and affirming LGBTQ persons; relationships with Black Baptists, including a public confession of our inherent racism; inter-faith relationships; Missions defined as partnership between an Alliance congregation and a partners with a Baptist congregation in another country, as we did with Ekkeslia Gethsemane in Cuba. The Alliance, now a network of about 140 congregations, has never settled as a set institution. The movement quality continues, the Alliance moving out into ever widening circles of engagement far exceeding our founding vision.

So with our Circle. In 2003 Joyce, Nancy, and Ken on the infamous walk said in essence, “Let’s move out on a vision of a new form of church.” It was not so much their “no” to the church as it was more a “yes” to doing church as a small, feisty, open and on the move, not pastor centered, not owning space, not beliefs-dependent but moving out empowered by one simple passionate belief --- “we believe that doing justice and loving mercy are intimately tied to walking humbly with God.” Did you hear that echo? Do you see the Micah, Jesus, Alliance thread we follow --- the thread that’s hard to see, the thread to hold on to lest we get lost? Do you see it --- amid the changes --- the thread that doesn’t change?

With the Alliance gathering I continued to wonder out loud --- well, maybe the thread is partnership. Is this the thread that goes among things that change but doesn't change?

The Alliance began with a covenant, covenant promises, not a creed, not an orthodoxy, a set of doctrines. Covenants are about relationships of shared power. From the beginning our Alliance family --- as our UCC family --- has been all about power --- not power over or coercive power --- but power with the other, or shared power. The purpose of the Alliance is to bring the people into collaborative, respectful partnerships which is justice which is God.

That's the intention. The Alliance has intentionally worked on this essential shift from the abuse of power to empowering partnerships: the Alliance staff, women and men, clergy and laity in leadership; actions and declarations addressing racial, gender, sexual identity, economic, religious inequities, and linking up as mutual partners with like-spirited congregations in other nations.

But 5,000 years of conditioning within domination systems is hard to overcome. This arc toward justice, named by Martin King, is so slow to bend. There so much work to do. But I pondered with the Alliance gathering, is partnership, relationships of shared, mutual power the thread we have followed? Is this thread the one we must keep grasping as non-negotiable?

When it comes to our Circle, do I hear an Amen? Is not this the thread we have followed? The circle itself, meeting in a circle, reminds us every week that we are a circle of mutuality. You can see partnering every where we look in this Circle of Mercy --- the power sharing among staff ministers, the pastors and council, the pastors and council interacting with congregation, and the partnering we embody with others --- the good work we give from the title of our budget, the coalitions in the community such as CUC, the emerging movement of solidarity with immigrants among us, the Land of the Sky and on and on. Is that the thread --- our intention to embody joint power and empowering. It's that power like the blade of grass that cannot be stopped by the asphalt surface. It's our work, hard work, really hard work of learning in our friendships, marriages, work and congregational life how to be covenant partners. Maybe that's the thread we follow.

Or, as I continued to reflect out loud with that Alliance gathering, I said could this be the thread --- God? Yes, God. In the Alliance, as with us, we don't easily talk about God. And for good reason. The word carries so much baggage. So much harm has been done and is being done in the name of God and Jesus and the church. In a Pew study of Millenials the most characteristic description of the church was "hypocrisy." Yes, we understand. Sad but understand. We all move in and out of circles where the notion of God is absurd and the church is deemed dangerous or at least irrelevant. To them Christianity is a failed story. And this too: we carry the hesitancy of God talk, sharing with our Jewish friends the reluctance to name this Mystery knowing that any words fall short every time.

But having said that, I declare the central thread is God or if you prefer Love or Justice or Shalom or Mercy --- as long as they have capital letters. That is, Something is going on among us that is more than us or the sum of us. I think the Enlightenment with its complete confidence in human reasoning got it wrong. Human beings cannot live without transcendent meaning. And transcendence is a fancy word for a Spirit of Love or Force of Justice more than we are and a Spirit-Force that threads our life together.

We have to reach for metaphors as our way to touch the Mystery we name God. Take the metaphor of music. God is like Music. A miracle happens regularly here: there is Brian and the other instrumentalists, there is you and me the singers, there are the words set to music --- all in the service of the Music this invisible and mysterious experience. Sometimes as you are listening or singing, something happens, as shift occurs. You find yourself caught up in the Music, so much so the Music can seem to be singing you, becoming you and you becoming it. That's the Mystery, the transcendent, like a Breath breathing you, the More than you and me at work in and through us.

It looks like we make music happen. It looks like the Alliance for thirty years has made some justice and mercy happen. It looks like during our sixteen years as COM that good leaders and faithful members made some amazing mercy happen. It looks that way. But there is something deeper going on. God, this Mystery of beauty, love, mercy and justice, this Spirit, this Force like Music happens through us. The shift can happen --- more living from God than living for God.

When Jesus was asked one day, “What’s the thread, what the greatest of the commandments? He quoted the Shema “love God with all you are --- mind, heart, soul and body” and added a phrase from Leviticus: love your neighbor as yourself --- not like you love yourself --- but “as yourself.” Yes, that’s the thread! When Jesus was announcing the thread of his life work, he quoted Isaiah, “The Spirit is upon me and announcing me to declare good news to the poor, proclaim release to captives, give sight to the blind, to set those oppressed free.” Yes, there it is --- the thread. When Micah was pondering what is required, what is the bottom-line thread, he said it was to “do justice, show mercy and walk humbly with God.” Sound familiar? We can see it, our COM stated thread every Sunday noted at the bottom of the bulletin: “seeking justice . . . pursuing peace . . . following Jesus.” The thread. The thread.

And notice this about the thread, it usually is seen doing it miraculous, surprising work through unlikely small things and events: Israel, for one, a little tribe tossed about by stronger neighbors; or Jesus who in a distant place in the Roman Empire looses the following, looses his disciples and finally looses his life for loving, not hating his opposition. He taught about transforming power from small things --- like seeds, a candle, salt, leaven; Rosa Parks sitting down in the white section, as planned, but having no idea that she was starting a revolution; or a small band of Southern Baptists becoming a small network of 140 Baptist congregations called the Alliance; or the small group of forty or fifty adults and about twelve children called the Circle of Mercy. All small, unlikely conduits of God’s movement of shalom in the world. “Who would have “thunk” it possible. “My, my” as Ken might say in the Amen corner.

And yes, do you remember Zacchaeus? You know, the Jewish tax collector, working for the Romans and ostracized for betraying his people. You know the story. He wanted to see Jesus but being short he climbed up in a tree. And Jesus comes along, alarming everyone, announcing he's going home with him. Jesus, no doubt sensing his isolation and loneliness whispers in Zacheus's ear, "And this too, Zacchaeus, you are a son of Abraham." In other words, "Zacchaeus, don't forget who you are. Don't forget the thread."

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