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Flourishing 2023

And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”
Ezekiel 47:12 ESV

As I shared in my sermon remarks last Sunday, I have chosen the concept of “flourishing” for the theme of my pastoral leadership in 2023. The imagery of Ezekiel chapter 47 is powerfully poignant and inspiring. I especially like the comments from MacLaren’s Expositions (Ezekiel 47)

That imaginary geography tells us this, that what is to bless the world must come from above the world. There needs a waterfall to generate electricity; the power which is to come into humanity and deal with its miseries must have its source high above the objects of its energy and its compassion, and in proportion to the height from which it falls will be the force of its impact and its power to generate the quickening impulse. All merely human efforts at social reform, rivers that do not rise in the Temple, are like the rivers in Mongolia, that run for a few miles and then get sucked up by the hot sands and are lost and nobody sees them any more. Only the perennial stream, that comes out from beneath the Temple threshold, can sustain itself in the desert, to say nothing of transforming the desert into a Garden of Eden. So moral and social and intellectual and political reformers may well go to Ezekiel, and learn that the ‘river of the water of life,’ which is to heal the barren and refresh the thirsty land, must come from below the Temple threshold.

A flourishing church begins with a deep awareness of and reliance on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The church is foundationally a spiritual body – not simply an organization defined by numbers and assets and programs. It is intended to be an extension of Heaven – an embodiment of the life-giving and life-sustaining qualities. Hope-Peace-Joy-Love are to be more than mere words or holiday sentiments, they are to be definitive of a Spiritual power and presence that transforms and transports the ordinary into the extraordinary. The Divine Epiphany.

While much of the role of church, as experienced by those who participate, is to engage the Holy (the sphere of the soul and spirit) offering opportunities for the mundane to encounter the sublime, the ordinary to encounter the divine. We call it by such names as communion, worship, prayer, meditation. Some, if not most, have been conditioned to assume that this weekly ritual is all that is needed to sublimate the temporal and to appease the Eternal.

I contend that should we take the meaning of The Epiphany as it was received by those first observers and their successive decedents, then the church would most carefully consider its role for caring for the least, the lost, and the last – those who are marginalized by misfortune and circumstance – who are standing in line for the next social aid, and those who are in spiritual distress. For example, this sense of place and purpose is being demonstrated by churches that are selling their properties and investing in neighborhoods of need. This relational-based religion is seeking to be authentically Christ-like in a world composed of the disadvantaged, underserved, and spiritually wounded.

The following are central concepts developed during my doctoral studies for advocating that churches become agents of community transformation (Source: Tommy Goode, City Core Initiative).

- *ConneXions* is an (urban) missions project to: Reach – Teach – Connect – Mobilize – Empower God’s people for kingdom service (in the city core).
- Purpose(s): affirm all person’s God-given giftedness and personal capacities; connect persons with others in growth and giftedness networks; connect networks to ways and means to use giftedness and share capacities; improve community quality of life from the inside out; connect persons and processes to faith in Jesus Christ.
- Organizational and functional guides: collaborative, interdenominational, interdisciplinary, multicultural, multiethnic, cross-cultural, self-directed, servant oriented, culturally relevant, biblically authentic, life learning, cross training, entrepreneurial and philanthropic stewardship.

What if the church(es) were to embrace the transformation mission of being sources for flourishing, i.e., the life-giving river that nourishes life and health in their communities of influence and mission?