

We are nearing the mid-point of 2015. We heard the solemn challenge of Lent to reflection and repentance. We walked with Jesus during Holy Week from Palm Sunday to the Upper Room, where we heard Jesus say: *John 13:34 (NRSV)* ³⁴ *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.* We owned our own betrayals and denials of Jesus, then we stood beneath the cross of Jesus on Good Friday, and heard him pray, *Luke 23:34 (NRSV)* *“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*] We heard him breath his last with the confident cry, *John 19:30 (NRSV)* *“It is finished.”* We heard the Good News of Easter; three word that changed our lives and changed our world (and still are!): “He is risen!” We waited with his disciples, saw Jesus ascend into heaven, and on Pentecost received power from on high with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then we wondered in more ways than one what the reality of God is like and what the Trinity means for us and for our world.

Now what? Now we enter Ordinary Time. The paraments are green, and they will remain green for quite a while. Ordinary Time seems ordinary; how could any time measure up to what we’ve been through? How could any ground be as holy as the ground we’ve walked these past 6 months?

Now what? This isn’t a time to stand still. It’s not a time to press the pause button and take a deep breath. This is the time to grow. This is the time for us to deepen our faith. This is the time for us to claim and reclaim the confidence of Paul who wrote (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit), *2 Corinthians 5:6–8 (NRSV)* ⁶ *So we are always confident; even though we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord—* ⁷ *for we walk by faith, not by sight.* ⁸ *Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*

We have work to do. We have challenges to face. As we do so, we are confident no matter where we are, no matter what we are going through, no matter the challenge that lies before; we are confident because wherever we are, we are in Christ; God’s new creation is alive and well in us; in Christ we are at home even when we feel so far away.

1. Home

“Home is where the heart is,” or so we are told; so, where is your heart? Where is our heart as Penside Presbyterian Church? On whom or what is our heart set? For as Jesus told us, *Matthew 6:21 (NRSV)* *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

We have work to do. We have challenges to face, and we will! One article I read following the recent Pew Survey that chronicled the challenge we face in the rise of “The Nones” spoke of “The Death of Casual Christianity.” The article described how Christian faith and practice have become indistinguishable from American society. Religious and political progressives sound

alike. Religious and political conservatives sound alike. And this rising generation has judged us with their hearts, their feet, and their faith. In their eyes, our hearts are not in the right place.

The Early Church faced great challenges and they did so with confidence; confidence that did not look to their circumstances. Frankly, Paul had the confidence to admit that their circumstances gave them no reason for confidence. Paul faced his challenges with his heart set on Jesus: *2 Corinthians 5:14–15 (NRSV) For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.¹⁵ And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.*

Christ's love for us is urging us on. Christ's love for us is our spiritual home. Wherever we go, whatever we face; however strange and uncomfortable and uncertain things may become, we can face these new realities with confidence; confidence that does not depend on our circumstances; confidence that rests on Christ's love for us.

Christ's love will not change. Christ's love cannot be earned, for it is freely given. Christ's love cannot be lost, for it finds us. When we don't know where to go or what to do, we know that Christ loves us and has brought us together as Pennside Presbyterian Church and that always gives us a place to start.

The following parable illustrates the possibilities that can emerge when we have a place to start: Four young men sit by the bedside of their dying father. The old man, with his last breath, tells them there is a huge treasure buried in the family fields. The sons crowd around him crying, "Where? Where?" but it is too late. The day after the funeral and for many days to come, the young men go out with their picks and shovels and turn the soil, digging deeply into the ground from one end of the field to the other. They find nothing and, bitterly disappointed, abandon their search.

The next season the farm has its best harvest ever. (Zander, 2000)¹

Before we set any goals, before we make any plans, during these months of Ordinary Time, walk by faith and not by sight; dig deep. Dig deep by going home. Judge for yourself – where is your heart? Where is our heart as a church? The constant temptation we face is to call where we are home and to base our confidence on our circumstances. Sooner or later, circumstantial confidence is exposed as false, and the rise of the None's has exposed the false confidence of the American church, and I submit, of our church.

Home is where the heart is, so wherever you may go this summer, go home. Dig deep. Think about how much Jesus loves you and how much Jesus loves this world. God-only-knows what

¹ Rosamund Stone Zander and Dieter Zander, "The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life." (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2000) 65.

may grow in us and through us when we make the love of Jesus for us and for the world our confidence and our calling. Home is where the heart is, so this summer, go home.

2. Away

Pennside Presbyterian Church is our church home, and we are changing. It has been 6 months since our secretary retired and we changed from having a paid staff person to having a team of volunteers serve as our secretary.

Our response to this change has been interesting. First, a team gathered quickly. They stepped up and said, "Count on me." They learned how to produce our weekly bulletin and mailing, and they are doing it.

Second, fresh eyes see things in fresh ways. We all have our ways, and bringing in this group has brought some positives and made the office more user-friendly.

At the same time, we have expressed a desire to again have a paid staff person, but we haven't been able to articulate why in terms of how the work we need done requires one permanent staff person, and I wonder if there's something deeper here? I wonder if this is our feeling "away" and wanting to go home, to be the church we used to be.

Maybe I'm missing something and if there is an operational concern that I'm not seeing, please, tell me so we can deal with it.

And I think it's bigger than simply Pennside not being what Pennside used to be; society has changed; we do not communicate the way we used to. We used to write letters; now we write emails. We used to place calls to a residence or business, and if a business, then during business hours 9 to 5. Now we have cell phones and send text messages at all hours.

We live in a 24/7 world. We live in a world where technology allows for access anytime, anywhere. We email. We use social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instant Messaging. We have our cell phones and send texts.

And meanwhile, the rising generation has already moved away from these forms of social media to new ones like Instagram and Tumblr and more.

Right now, I am reading Gen. Stanley McChrystal's book, "Team of Teams," in which he explores how it was that the greatest fighting force in the world: US Special Forces -- Seals and Green Berets and Rangers were being defeated by a vastly inferior force -- Al Qaeda in Iraq. He points to two factors -- Al Qaeda's use of social media (e.g. a video on You Tube brought down Hosni Mubarak in Egypt) and a more fluid, flexible, adaptive structure. US Special Forces had to adapt from a rigid hierarchical structure to something with similar adaptability.

What the rise of the None's and our feeling about not having a secretary may have in common is the challenge of feeling away; the challenge of having familiar confidences taken away from us.

This challenge is our opportunity for this summer. It is the focus of my study. It will be the focus of Session's study. I invite you to join us in rising to this challenge and seizing the opportunity. Dig deep. How are you and we at home in this world, perhaps too at home in this world? How are we away, and where might that be?

This challenge is our opportunity to experience the promise of our faith in a new way: 2 *Corinthians 5:17 (NRSV)* ¹⁷ *So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

"The fourteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhart once observed, "The spiritual life is not a process of addition, but rather of subtraction." What we subtract in our lives [and our life together] depends ... on what initially fills it.... In the face of all of our trials and tribulations Paul reminds us transformation is possible when we invite Christ into our lives and enable him to make us a new creation from the inside out." (Elliot, 2009)

We have work to do. We have challenges to face. And we will. Home is where the heart is, so this summer. Go home. Dig deep. Renew your faith and trust and confidence in Christ; subtract all that stands between you and Christ's love. We walk by faith and not by sight. We walk by faith in Christ in Whom there is a new creation. We walk by faith in Christ home and away. Amen.