

“Does church even make sense anymore?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Let's go to Gideon, Iowa, a small town that you won't find on any map because it exists only in the imaginative mind of author Marilynne Robinson. One of her novels, set in the town of Gideon, tells the story of Lila. For most of her young life, Lila didn't know anything about the church. Didn't know anything about God or Jesus Christ or the Bible or anything that many of us take for granted.

She did know poverty. She knew neglect as a child. She knew hunger and desperation and exploitation and violence. She knew the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, which choked the land with dust and wind. She knew farming and drifting, the knife she carried in her pocket, and what it meant not to have a home. She knew beauty and laughter and joy as well, the swell of the river and its coolness on her skin, the smell of dirt and roses, and the taste of fresh apples on a shining summer day. She knew people who never went to church because they couldn't afford to give up a day and not work.

So when she wandered, one day, into a little Congregationalist church in Gideon, just to get out of the rain, she felt confused, like she didn't belong. It was all so strange to her: the archaic Scriptures, babies dipped in water, the prayers and hymns everyone knew but her, the waste of candles burning during daylight, stories about people who died a long time ago, words like resurrection. She felt like everyone else had a script and knew all their lines, knew when to stand and when to sit, when to pray and when to sing, and she had walked into a play she knew nothing about.

If church felt strange and irrelevant to Lila in the late 1940s, imagine how strange and irrelevant it must feel today. Or maybe you don't need to imagine; maybe *you* don't know what's going on or why you're here or what all this has to do with your real life: your job, your relationships, the things that give you joy and the things that keep you up at night. That may be why many have disengaged from the church.

According to Gallup, 2020 was the first year in history when the majority of Americans did not belong as members to a faith community. Church membership was 70 percent in 1999. Twenty years later, it's 47 percent. And among millennials, my generation, it's only 36 percent. What do you think it's going to be in another 20 years?

Demographers say that, on average, churches lost a third of their congregation during the pandemic. I made a list for the deacons of the people we haven't seen much of in the last two years, either in person or online, and yeah, it was about a third of the congregation, especially our young families.

At first, online worship was exciting, and when everything shut down, people had more time for church; we had so many online worshipers; we thought Westminster had quadrupled in size. But then, as the pandemic wore on, life got stressful and overwhelming; political and social tensions rose, with big problems of racism and violence and family. And people just got tired. They prioritized what was important and booted everything else, and for many, that included the church. They learned they could live just fine without us.

That's how Lila felt. Except, when she walked into the church that day to get out of the rain, she recognized something in the eyes of the pastor; she saw there some of the same loneliness she knew, a widower whose wife and child had died in childbirth many years ago. When she asked him about why things happen the way they do, he said, "There's been a good deal of sorrow in this old place... So I sort of live with the question. Why things happen."

Later, she saw him with a family, coming out of the church after a funeral. He held their hands, whispered to them. The widow placed her head on his shoulder and sobbed, as he put his arm around her and just held her. "What do you say to them, she thought, when they stand around you like that, like they just *need* to hear it, whatever it is? I want to know what you say."

She began to write down, over and over, verses from the Bible, often the strangest ones. Passages about suffering, and fire, and storms, about void and darkness, about babies put in baskets and sent down rivers. She wrote the letters slowly and carefully, feeling their mystery connect with hers. She knew about prairie fires and droughts and winds too. She knew about the wildness of existence, its dual capacity for wonder and terror. And this woman, abandoned as a child, saved by the compassion of a drifter, especially related to these words from Ezekiel: "And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to cleanse thee; thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all. No eye pitied thee, to do any of these things unto thee, to have compassion upon thee; but thou wast cast out in the open field, for that thy person was abhorred, in the day that thou wast born. And when I passed by thee, and saw thee weltering in thy blood, I said unto thee, Though thou art in thy blood, live; yea, I said unto thee, Though thou art in thy blood, live."

The author writes, "She never expected to find so many things she already knew about written down in a book... It could be that the wildest, strangest things in the Bible were the places where it touched earth."

It's like in our Scripture today. It's a weird and disturbing passage. I thought to myself: Can we really read this? People don't want to hear this. And then I thought about this life, and decided, yeah, we need to read this, because this is true. I mean, I certainly hope not many of us are literally being sawed in half. But to lose a loved one, to experience a break up or a divorce, to face poverty or aging or illness, to feel depression or experience trauma, to feel overwhelmed and stressed and like you're failing at life, that's like being sawed in half. We know what it is to pass through seas and the mouths of lions, to wander deserts and mountains and caves, to feel like we're running this race that just keeps going and we're tired but we can't give up. And God knows too. Because Jesus came into all this, through his birth, his life, his death on the cross.

We are the only religion with a suffering, dying, crucified God, a lost and lonely and grieving God, a God of alleys and gutters and sleepless nights. A God not only of the heavens but of the earth, of the mud. A God who faced it all, who died, and then said, not only to God's self but to all creation, to you and to me, and to every person in every dark pit, every child in every lonely field: "Live... Again, I say, Live!"

And when I think about that, I realize that this place, this church, when it's right, when it's true, it's the only place that makes sense.

That's the one thing the church has that makes lots of sense today: we understand that the world is a crazy, hurting, broken, but also wondrous and beautiful, place. And we have something here, cobbled together from centuries of searching, to do more than survive this world: a faith to face it, a love to transform it. And so I wonder if we are called to focus the identity of the church here, and let go of the rest.

I'm not saying we change everything. Traditions matter. I love all this, as many of you do as well. I am suggesting simply that we may need to hold them a little more loosely, because these traditions are not God, and these things I love can at times be barriers, as they were for Lila. They are barriers, especially, when they form our identity as a church: the organ, the hymns, the clothes, the order of service, the building, being Presbyterian, the Session and committees, the doctrines, the comfort of being around similar people. What if we came to define our faith differently? A relevant church is a place that heals, a place that wrestles with the complexities and hardness and wonderfulness of life, and ministers there in a way few other things can, with love, with solidarity, with community, with beauty and wonder, with meals and prayer shawls and listening when you're sick or in need, with standing up for each other—whether we're poor or gay or transgender or a different race or disabled, whether we're happy or sad or both all at once. It meets you and loves you as you are, and gives you hope. Hope that you are not alone, hope that life can come out of these ashes.

Presbyterian pastor Rob Dyer, reflecting on the pandemic, says that our people are traumatized. People are questioning everything from how they earn their living to their safety to their relationships to what matters in life. He writes, "And if the church hasn't offered answers for those questions yet, then we need to figure out how to do so now. We need to figure out what it means to be a spiritual trauma center for our communities. We need to reintroduce ourselves as a place that can tend to the wounds this pandemic has opened... almost as if launching a new church."

Lila opened a Bible and found in its weird words a reflection of her own life. That's what church should do for people: show them their world and say with Ezekiel, "Live!" That's when church makes sense in today's post-church world—when it faces death and gives life. Gives wild courage and love and fire and amazement. **Amen.**