

Do you know the name Harry Truman? Let me be clearer. Do you know the name Harry Randall Truman? No, he was not a former president. He was a homeowner at the foot of Mount St. Helens in Washington State. The story is told that in 1980, the volcanic mountain was showing signs of a major eruption. Indeed an expert declared that the chance of a major eruption was virtually 100 percent.

Truman's home was located at the south end of Spirit Lake at the foot of the mountain. He was living in the most likely path of the volcanic flow. He was facing an almost certain death.

Government officials implored him to leave. Friends told him that his failure to move was tantamount to suicide. Family members begged him to leave lest he die.

But the story says that on May 18, 1980, the massive eruption took place. The lava flowed right in the projected path of Truman's home. It was on May 18, 1980 that Harry Randall Truman died. He died because he couldn't let go of his home, even if it meant certain death. His inability to face certain change cost him his life. <sup>(1)</sup>

Having traveled around this country in jobs I've had in the national setting and the conference settings of the UCC and having visited many churches large and small, I have come to understand and seen for myself that too many of our churches these days have what I now call, "Truman disease." These are churches that simply refuse to let go of things that hinder them from embracing the future that God may have in store for them in a full throated way. While

this church surely is open and willing to let go of sacred cows, place past achievements in their proper perspective, *at least I hope you are*, many churches these days, sadly, are not ready to do the same. Churches, particularly mainline churches are finding it harder and harder to let go of past victories, relying upon past successes, still basking in the “glory days” rather than embracing an often unknown future with hope and with faith. They too often harbor resources for a rainy day and fail to see the rain is falling and the roof is beginning to leak. There are many churches out there these days that will simply walk the road toward congregational demise rather than renew themselves for ministry, point themselves toward the future. Harry Randall Truman lives in many of our churches today. It is why installation moments should be about celebration but also about taking stock of what was; what is and what can be. Installation time is a time to redouble efforts, refocus mission and renew commitment, not a time to find someone to simply celebrate the past heroes of the church or oversee the slow erosion that so often occurs in declining churches. It is erosion that many who remain in the church find hard to see.

The fact is, joining a church is not at the top of most people’s list today. Joining a church that is justice minded and socially inclusive is like a hidden gem in most communities. Churches like ours are often the best kept secret in town. In this social networking age, mobile and gifted adults are reluctant to join and value what the church is, and place little value in what the church has been. Joining a church these days is mostly a personal decision, and that’s not a bad thing, but it is certainly not a duty or



something expected or required as it once was. We are living in what one writer calls “the dis-membership generation,” those who are redefining what membership is and what it could become.

Churches must adjust. Church leaders must stop taking for granted that the formula is easy. The present generation of adults is invested, but not in the ways of the past. In too many places the church has become a place to pry open one’s wallets or even a place where spirit is sadly void of real depth or substance. In this new normal of being church, nearly gone is an unwavering loyalty to church work or spirituality based upon board and committee meeting. People join today because the church is touching their own spiritual nerve and the ministry is filling a void and need they have to be of service. They join, thank God they join because Jesus has touched their life in personal ways. They join because some core value is enlivened and celebrated.

I would suggest to you as you install your pastor today, as she settles more deeply into this work among you, that you have chosen a person who has a deep sense of her own values and principles, a well developed sense of what guides her and from a place at her very core. As Patricia and I have sat at table with her and Steven many times, I can assure you that her core is solid and full of life, seasoned deeply with God’s spirit. She is one who is wedded to Steven, not your church’s past. Nanette is one who is a woman who is fearless to speak about justice, very bold in her truth telling and courageous in sharing her conviction to help the least, the lost and the left out that live around you. She will live by her core values, values that may challenge you sometimes, but challenge that will allow



the core values of this church to live and flourish and blend with Nanette. Your challenge as well, is to never confuse the church's core values with some moment when the church felt good about itself. Core values are usually things that start with words like justice or love or mission.

Too often churches are caught up in looking through the rear view mirror, rather than looking ahead. The best thing going for any church is when the church understands that it is a breathing entity, an organism that is alive and loving, able to touch the inner places of people's spiritual hunger. But at the core of any church still lives a need to help somebody and seeks to make this world a better place.

People clearly want to be part of something, rather than simply on the roles or on the list. They want to know that their membership matters and will lead to constructive things. I hope your church will ask itself about what are the values held dear at the core of this community. With the answers you find, I hope they will shape your future.

The lesson in the Old Testament today, like now, was written at a time of great challenge and change. Important questions arose as people wanted to know what the authentic direction to follow should be. The passage starts out with the phrase, "Vindicate me," or judge me, as they wanted to think they had lived a life of integrity and trusted God without wavering. The cry of the psalmist is for God to know the writers heart, to test and know even the inner thoughts. The writer wants God to look at the writer's core. It says in the end that God understands, has felt what others feel and despite the warts that it has – God will not abandon or forget them. I like this passage because it reminds us that God has not given up on us. It reassures us that even



though we may have failed, or been challenged in our corporate life, that God still welcomes us home. Back to the place that centers us. Back to a place that offers a clear sense of purpose. We are not depleted but renewed by God. We can find comfort and strength in God's house and if we embrace the knowledge that some things may need to change. At the core, we say in the UCC "God is still speaking" the question is, are we listening.

Check out Romans 12, where it says, "Let love be genuine, hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor." It's a set of core values. It reminds us that the church is called out of the world, but with a distinct mission in the world. Ours is the task to love and to care, to invite and to welcome and embrace each person who ventures into God's house. But it is also for those who can not for many reasons find the doorway into God's house, finding ways to help them in to the presence of God too.

Some of you will remember that television series the Lone Ranger. Well for those of you too young to remember, let me simply say that I can remember that the Lone Ranger had a motto or a creed. There may be one or two of you out there that may just remember it. For those of you a bit younger, it was as familiar to many as the "The Boy Scout Oath." Give up..., the creed says, "I believe that to have a friend, a man must be one." We might clean up the language today and say, "*I believe that to have a friend, a person must be one.*" The point is that at our core, at the church's core is the willingness to exhibit the love of God to all who come our way. I am hopeful that at the core of this church's value system is that love transcends race or



class, gender, even orientation. It must be love that is bigger than economic status or educational pedigree. God's love is for all, in all and covers all. It's a core value.

My friends, consider the possibilities of creating a community, a faith community that is as Paul says, "not conformed to this age, but transformed by a renewal of the mind," a community that recognizes that acts of love will always trump moments of hate and violence, a faith community that its about justice and not just about us, that's about "craving a stone of hope, out of a mountain of despair," like Martin King said.

All the pieces are now in place. Your installation moment signals a new chapter in the life and ministry of this place. The core values of this church are what brought this faith community into existence and will sustain it through the generations to come. Nanette and First Church, I wish you well in this journey you now begin together.

Let me close with this. The story is told of an Olympic equestrian champion who was asked, "How does your horse know when it has to leap the hedges and hurdles, and why do some horses turn away and stumble?"

The woman thought, then answered, "That's simple. You tear your heart out of your body and throw it over the hedge. The horse knows how desperate you are to catch up to your heart. So it leaps."

On this Installation day, throw your heart out in front of you, people of God. I'm asking you to leap my friends, leap in the name of Jesus. Not just toward Nanette, but toward the needs of this world. So many people are desperate for you to share the loving Christ, the kind of Jesus that you have found. Let others see your good heart

out there before you. Leap! Others want to know this Jesus you know. Leap, for it is really the heart of Christ that is before you, just over the fence and just beyond the hurdles. Please don't be like Harry Randall Truman, refusing to change and embrace the future, the cost is simply too high. Leap and see what will happen in your life if you do. You will be amazed at what God will do with you if you do. You be blessed to make a difference in the world today.

Happy Installation day Nanette and to the people of First Church!

(1) *Autopsy of a Deceased Church - 12 Ways to keep yours alive* by Thom S. Rainer