

“Our City. Our Church. Our Future.”

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Everything has context. Everything. And the reason why everything has context is because the world is deeply relational. Nothing can exist separate and apart from context, which is why learning to read context is as important as learning to read the text itself.

Let me tell you what I mean . . . there's a golf course in west Texas, and the owner had a brilliant idea. He went around the country and copied the 18 most famous golf holes in America, and then he put them into one golf course in west Texas. It was a brilliant idea, but it was a complete failure of an idea.

You might try to copy the 18th hole at Pebble Beach, and you might be able to design the exact dimensions of that hole that majestically runs along the Pacific Ocean, but trust me, Texas is not Pebble Beach. You can replicate the golf hole, but without the context, it's nothing. He tried to replicate a hole from the famous Augusta National Golf Club. He designed it perfectly, but it's still not Augusta National. What's missing is context.

The same is true with our church. This church would be a very different church had it been built in Philadelphia or Atlanta. It would be very different had it been built in Pasadena or Malibu, as opposed to the city of Los Angeles. It's context. What my friend Amy Butler is doing at The Riverside Church in New York City might be a flop here at First Congregational Church of Los Angeles. Why? It's context. Context is everything.

So what is our context here? Well, first of all, we're an urban church and in Los Angeles that means we live in the whirlwind of diversity – cultural, racial, ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, economic. It's all here. We live in the most diverse city in America. And we don't just tolerate diversity in our church. We embrace it. We welcome it. We celebrate it. And we do it, not because it sounds like the platform of the Democratic party. No! That's not it at all.

We celebrate the diversity of Los Angeles because theologically we believe that Jesus Christ embodied the radical welcome of the kingdom of God. And we believe it because Jesus Christ pointed to a God that transcends every single label we try to put on people, including religious labels.

We celebrate diversity in our church because we're Christians, not because we're liberals, but because when you believe that Jesus Christ has accepted you, you can't help but accept others! Our faith is forged by our context.

Now, this has not always been the case in our church. I think it's fair to say that for many years our church tried to be an island unto itself. That is not a criticism; it's merely an observation. We became an island of formal liturgy, punctuated by great organ music every Sunday. We became an island of classical music, celebrating everything from the greater works of Bach to the lesser works of Bach.

We became an island, more or less, of older white cultured America, the symphony crowd, the opera crowd, the theater crowd, the country club crowd, the white-glove, old-school, limousine, Hancock Park crowd. And for years the church consisted of people trying to preserve a certain kind of world, a certain kind of culture, including trying to preserve the best of the 1950's. But the 1950's are over. And no matter who tells you, and no matter what you print on a t-shirt or baseball cap, that time is never coming back to American churches. It is over!

And so we have a choice . . . we can either try to be an island unto ourselves – turning the church into a protected castle – or we can open our doors and open our hearts and open our minds wider than we ever thought possible, participating in the culture of our time and place and making a difference in the diverse lives of people today. I contend that when we do that, not only do we welcome others, which is a very Jesus thing to do, but we also wind up enriching our own lives.

Gay culture doesn't threaten our church; it enriches our church. Celebrating the creativity and spiritual intelligence of women doesn't threaten our church; it enriches our church. Doing music from Mexico or Spain or Korea or Africa doesn't threaten our church; it enriches our church.

Allowing a diversity of theological ideas doesn't compromise our community of faith; it makes our community of faith stronger. The last thing we need to do is become an island! We need to be a roundabout or a rotary or an international airport, the kind of church that has all kinds of people getting on and off and entering the flow of God's activity.

A few weeks ago our city remembered the pain and chaos of the L.A. Riots. Some of you were here during that time. Our city was on fire. People were killed. Stores were looted. It was a week when pent-up anguish over race exploded. It was race and culture and ethnicity, and it all ignited after the verdict for those police officers who nearly beat Rodney King to death.

Dr. Martin Luther King once observed, "A riot is the language of the unheard." I agree. What do you think Black Lives Matter is about? What do you think of Occupy Wall Street is about? It's the language of the unheard. I mention this because I did a little research a few weeks ago, and I could not find one thing, one thing, that our church did to move toward our city during that fateful week 25 years ago.

Now, Dr. Cecil Williams did. He was the Senior Minister of First AME Church of Los Angeles. He was out on the streets trying to calm the violence and create dialogue. Now maybe something was done here. I don't know. But I think we were in such an island mentality at that point in our history, that we locked the doors and hunkered down and hoped no one would burn the church down.

But I've been wondering: What would we do today? Would we stand up today? Would we be in the mix today? Would we throw ourselves like a living Christ into the pain and challenge and beauty of our great city of Los Angeles if our city needed us? Context is everything.

God doesn't call us to be an island. God calls us to be a boat. A life raft. A cruise ship. A row boat. A speed boat. And if someone needs rescuing in the form of finding love and hope and friendship, finding forgiveness and joy and justice, then we're going to make room for that person inside our church. Hunkering down is not an option!

Honest to God, I would rather sell this church building than give up and hunker down and become a pathetic little religious museum. Context.

I look around closer at home, and I see our church neighborhood in the midst of radical change right now. Have you noticed that?

It's so exciting. We got a Starbucks! We have a Target coming in across the street. There's even a rumor that we're going to have a new soccer field in our neighborhood! We've never ever been much of a neighborhood church, but in the next five years we're going to have that opportunity. But will we find a way to welcome into our church those people coming into our neighborhood?

Our message cannot be – “Become just like us . . . and you can belong to our church, too.” Our approach must be – “God loves you just the way you are. Bring your culture. Bring your background. Bring your style and interest and spiritual longing. Bring your education and your brokenness and your peculiarities, because there is always room in this boat for one more person.”

Diversity. That's part of our context. Diversity. But there's something else, and for me there is no place quite like Los Angeles because of its creativity. Creativity. Oh, I know, this is Hollywood and we have the film industry, but it's more than that. This is a city of writers and composers and painters and musicians and actors and producers and designers and entertainers and singers and directors and activists and environmentalists and on and on and on it goes.

There's something about the creative energy of Los Angeles that sizzles through the veins of this city and it bleeds into the life of our congregation. It's context. And it's why I think creative energy must sizzle inside our community of faith if we are to make a difference in our city.

Creativity goes to the heart of God. Think about it . . . in the Jewish tradition we first meet God / Yahweh creating the universe. Like a poet, God speaks the world into existence. And then in the Christian tradition, the Bible ends with God creating a new heaven and earth in the book of Revelation. From beginning to end, poet to architect, God is in the creativity business.

I had a friend, he no longer comes to our church, because he moved away, but he used to say to me every Sunday, “Good show today! Good show!” Now, at first I was taken aback by that comment. I wanted to say something like, “Wait a second, this isn't a show; it's nothing less than the worship of the almighty God of heaven and earth. This isn't entertainment; it's encountering the holy through music and liturgy and the sacrament of the Word.”

But I've gotten off my high horse a little bit on that one, because, well, because there is something theatrical about worship and there is something creative about liturgy and there is something entertaining about a good speech or inspiring music. I know we do it all to the glory of God, but it's really okay for it to be interesting!

And I'll tell you what else: When I visit other churches, no offense, but I find 99% of them so dreadfully boring that I want to run out of the church screaming! I'm all for being faithful to the Christian tradition, but God help us when we turn the divine dance of love into a somber funeral dirge.

Personally, I think one of the keys to our future is to take more creative risks. To find more creative partners. What other church in the city of Los Angeles has brought in a scientist, a Buddhist priest, a Jewish Rabbi, an Islamic Imam, an atheist, a writer, a poet, a musician, a painter, a filmmaker, a photographer, inviting all of them to reflect about faith in the 21st century?

We need to take more risks, not fewer! This fall we have a neuroscientist coming to our service to talk about spirituality. Trust me, there will be nothing boring about that Sunday! We have a new generation of young adults coming to our church, and the old boundaries that meant something to many of us, don't mean anything to them.

And so we have to honor the creative energy of God, not just in our personal lives, but in the life of our congregation. It's our context – diversity and creativity – and context is everything.

I want to end with this . . . our church started in a living room in Los Angeles 150 years ago. A woman by the name of Amanda Scott opened up her home and six people sat in her living room that day. They talked. They prayed. They made a plan for a congregational church.

And then as the evening wore on they lit an oil lamp. A simple oil lamp. We're still lighting lamps in this church. Every Sunday we try to bring a little light to our city of Los Angeles – a city of rich diversity and dazzling creativity. It's our context and our context is our mission.

Friends, I love you all. Let's love one another. Amen.