

LIVING DEEP  
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Psalm 130**

*Out of the depths I cry to You!*

*God, hear my voice!*

*Let your ears be attentive to my voice, my cries for mercy!*

*If You should number the times we stray from You, O Beloved,*

*Who could face You?*

*Yet You are ever ready to forgive, that we might be healed.*

*I wait for You, my soul waits,*

*And in your word, I hope;*

*My soul longs for you, more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning.*

*O people of the light, hope in the Beloved, for with God is abundant love and the fullness of deliverance; God will deliver us all.*

This is a year of major milestones, in the world, and here at SPC. It's been 50 years since that violent and pivotal year, 1968. More Light Presbyterians is celebrating 40 full years of work and witness on behalf of LGBTQ people in the church and the world (so much of it now bearing beautiful fruit). And here at SPC we are celebrating 275 years as a spiritual community—it says so right here on your bulletin banner. I've also realized recently, that our campus ministry program, Connections, turns 10 this fall. Which seems both small and somehow significant. Our bulletin banner also says this: Claiming the past, engaging the present and imagining the future: we choose welcome. So on this, college and young adult Sunday, it seems like a good time to wonder just what campus ministry might have to do with our past, present, future, and our commitment to choosing welcome.

After all, it's been 10 years, where are all the Shepherd students? Why don't we see them showing up here for Sunday morning worship; please don't hold your breath, that is not likely to happen anytime soon, which says nothing about the health of our program. The very expectation comes out of a different era, a different frame for understanding campus ministry—maybe, ministry in general. That older model understood ministry as evangelism—as in, let's go win some souls for Jesus, let's go form some good Presbyterians. I invite you to consider how very different *saving souls* and *choosing welcome* are as foundations for ministry.

I recently heard a pastor say if there aren't numbers involved, if this program does not put bodies in the pews, my people will not support it. To which a campus pastor responded: "Really? Does your church support programs to feed the hungry? Do you cut funding if those people don't show up for worship?" It was only a couple of years ago that our denomination (organizationally) shifted campus ministry out of evangelism into mission. Around the same time, it declared campus ministry a priority and then slashed its funding. I'm not gonna lie, this is a tough business, especially in an era of shrinking resources. And what I think it most requires is a deeply rooted

commitment to choosing welcome. That, and a willingness to put some resources into taking that welcome out into the world, without expectation.

It's a lesson I have to relearn over and over again. Every grant application still wants a body count, seeks to measure impacts, aspires to practicality. Honestly, I can't imagine anything less practical, and more vital, than finding ways to reach out, and bear the light and love of Christ, to that huge community of hungry young people just down the road. I actually think it is a *particular* call of this community here. And as my time in campus ministry comes to an end, which I sense that it is, it is my prayer that we will together find ways to renew and continue our formal commitment to this ministry. And what a perfect time, as we seek to call a new pastor.

When we imagined our program into being those many years ago, we didn't have much, so we brought what we did have; SPC's intention to be open to all sorts of people, including our years long commitment to the LGBTQ community in particular, our embrace of all sources of deep wisdom, and our identity as a people grounded in the way of Jesus. I, personally, had no experience or vision for this project at all, so with Randy's encouragement, I offered all I did have, which was primarily my perspective, tools and experience as a spiritual director. That ministry is all about showing up and listening to the Spirit for and with others, and perhaps offering a practice or two to help people go deeper, to connect more intentionally with self, God, and others.

A couple of loaves and a couple of fish, and Connections was born, complete with that rainbow "C", which is also an open circle. That image alone, by the way, I know, has planted seeds—I remember some years ago a conversation with a very gender ambiguous student who kept asking me over and over again—you're a church with a rainbow symbol? Are you SURE you know what that means?? Along the way, we've also enjoyed the financial and spiritual support of the Westminster Foundation of WV, which funds campus ministry all across the state. It has been and continues to be a transformative partnership. And today we have the opportunity to give back to that work in a particular way in our special offering.

Early on, Westminster helped us see the importance of just finding a way to show up. Despite my many reservations, it didn't take me long to recognize how much we really do have to offer just by being ourselves, an inclusive spiritual community—being able to say to that student, yup, we do know what that rainbow means, and we also have one on our church building. Being able to share a spiritual perspective that is less about thinking stuff and more about embodying love in the world.

Despite all the nonsense you read in the press, the so-called "nones" are not, by and large, atheists. They are simply not interested in formal, or formulaic, religious affiliation. (Also studies consistently show that the number one reason young people have rejected church is homophobia). The young people I've encountered over the years tend to be *more* hungry for meaning and hope, more attentive to and willing for the ways of the Spirit than many dedicated church goers. They also have keenly developed BS detectors, and cannot stand shallow piety. These young people are spiritual explorers—over the years I've sat with folks who embraced Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, along with the occasional cradle Presbyterian, and lots of none of the above. They have taught me so much. And, I've learned just how many of these students have

already in their short lives encountered unthinkable suffering: broken families and family rejection, violence, substance abuse, mental illness, cancer and the list goes on. And that's not even to mention the shared suffering we've all been living through recently, in this time of national chaos and brokenness.

Over the years here, I've learned that one of the most important things that *we* do together, whether in worship, or study or conversation, is live out an intention to hold sacred space, no matter what. That is a lesson that I carry with me over there. As Connections, we practice holding space for each other, through disappointment, confusion, deep suffering, as well as accomplishment, joy, delight. And like churches, every time there is a national tragedy—the Orlando massacre, the 2016 election—our little Connections circle can sometimes double over night. People who care seek out people who care. Sometimes folks will just show up once and I never see them again. It amazes me that somehow they know how to find us. And I believe that matters, that some kind of healing is made possible in that space where people can gather, for whatever reason, can cry out of the depths, can wait and watch and hope, together.

This Psalm in our lesson today (known in tradition as “*de profundis*”, *out of the depths*) is most often understood as a psalm of lament—a practice, that the church really, really, really needs to work at reclaiming in order to recover its authentic, prophetic voice. That's the sermon, by the way, that I set out to preach today. The loss of lament, argues Walter Brueggeman, stifles our capacity for holy anger at injustice and evil and promotes denial, all of which keeps us on the surface and sanctions the status quo. (This was in an essay, by the way, in Richard Rohr's periodical *Oneing*, in a whole series of essays devoted to anger—by far my favorite read of the summer.) But the more I dug into this Psalm 130, the more I saw that this is a really something more than lament. It is actually a more ambiguous and more expansive prayer. The psalmist cries out from the depths, demands repeatedly to be heard by God, and then simply promises to wait, watch and hope. And from that deep place, of watching and waiting and hoping without expectation, this prayer calls the whole community to enter the depths, trusting only in the abundant, liberating power of God's love. So the depths could mean lament, or sorrow, confusion, anger or love, beauty, joy. The point here, I think, is the plea for authentic spiritual and emotional connection; it is a call to the depths.

So what depths cry out in you today? How willing are you listen? What keeps you from doing so, and how do you know? What practices help you find the courage to go deep? These are, by the way, the exact kinds of questions that Connections is made of, that and the holy communion of Blue Moon nachos.

Spiritual writer Richard Foster opens an entire book about spiritual practice with this claim “The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people... superficiality, is the curse of our age... the spiritual life calls us to move beyond surface living into the depths.” Two weeks ago, we heard from Bethany Pryzbocki, a Connections alum, who has just completed her Young Adult Volunteer year in New Mexico (an opportunity she learned about on a Connections trip). She has now moved on to a Teach for America position, on a reservation in South Dakota, where she'll be teaching a class of very lucky third graders. Bethany is deep people. And I can't take credit for that, but I do believe that her years with Connections made a difference. I also know this—she gives me hope.

Theologian Paul Tillich, suggests that both the light of truth and the darkness of suffering are deep. Our problem is not light or darkness, but rather our preference for living on the surface. He writes: "We are more driven than driving. We do not stop to look at the height above us, or to the depth below us. We are always moving forward, although usually in a circle, which finally brings us back to the place from which we first moved. We are in constant motion and never stop to plunge into the depth. We talk and talk and never listen to the voices speaking to our depth and from our depth." Ultimately, he claims "The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it..." Or as I tell my skeptical students, just set it aside! Because, as Tillich continues, "Its not the name it's the depth that matters... in the depth is truth; and in the depth is hope; and in the depth is joy." And, I would add, community is really the only way I know to get there, living deep, together. Thanks be to God. Amen

E. Hornbeck 8/12/18