

B SERMON JULY 18, 2021 THE CHURCH IS...

Perhaps you remember a little song with actions:

Here is the church (*hands clasped together, fingers laced inwards*)

And here is the steeple (*have two pointer fingers point upwards*)

Open the doors (*open out thumbs*)

And see all the people (*turn hands up and wave fingers*)

So, a childhood image of the church...

The early church met in homes, or gathered by a river, or met on a hillside. Many times, during the past decade or so I've heard it said that the future church will once again meet in homes. The underground church -- the church in communist countries, or in countries where Christians were persecuted, met perhaps deep in the bush, or secretly in buildings unmarked by any symbol. And in the dark ages, the church was kept alive in the monasteries and abbeys.

"England's Winchester Cathedral once featured an extraordinary west window. But in 1642, following the outbreak of the Civil war, Cromwell's forces deliberately smashed the stained-glass panes. The broken pieces were hidden away in secret for eighteen years until the coronation of a new king. As the damage was so severe, it wasn't possible to restore the window to its former glory. Instead, the pieces were made into a mosaic: a work of beauty people now travel the world to see.

The people of Winchester saw the brokenness and knew it would never be the same, but they didn't give up. They sought to create something new and beautiful. The individual broken pieces did not achieve much on their own, but together, they formed a work of exceptional beauty (Resource, p. 109)."

Just as war impacted that cathedral, so too we as a church, and all other churches and institutions around this country and the world, have been impacted by the pandemic. Clergy have retired whether they reached the 65 year-old milestone or not, and so at least could draw their UCC pension and have an income. Churches' finances have deteriorated such that many can no longer afford full-time ministry, or sustain the part-time ministry which they had prior to covid. Most churches will see changes of some sort. The church is resilient, however. The church is creative. How about two neighbouring pastoral charges who finally might get together to share a minister, after decades of occasional conversations?

"The people of Winchester saw the brokenness and knew it would never be the same, but they didn't give up. They sought to create something new and beautiful." We know the church will never be the same. We can bemoan that, grumble and complain, walk away, or we can breathe in deeply of the Spirit, wait for inspired promptings, and take a step of faith to create something new and beautiful. We can be reactive or proactive. We can be negative, or positive in our outlook.

And maybe the entering into this post-pandemic time, we hope, is a great place to stop and ponder what it really means to be the church. Maybe it is a time to determine anew what our mission is, our vision, and our values. Maybe it is a time to become clearer about our purpose, our identity. Who are we, going forward? Are we really intent about following Christ's call upon our lives? Maybe you might recall these words from previous sermons, "your mission is where your great passion and the world's great need intersect." In it's 60 plus years history, the town of Elliot Lake has undergone several metamorphoses. And perhaps it's too early to say yet, but maybe she is in the early stages of yet another transformation.

Buildings cost a lot of money to run and maintain, and the larger the church building, the more it costs. How important is the building? How important was

the building during the pandemic? Congregants survived largely without it. Most staff worked remotely. Do we really need a building?

Let me share some observations. For the past four Thursdays, from 11:00 to 1:00 The Mission, Outreach, Stewardship and Service Committee (MOSS) has run a yard sale/craft sale/bake sale. To date, over \$1,200 has been taken in as revenue.

Let me diverge for a moment and do some advertising -- there will be one on Thursday the 22nd, and a grandiose one on Saturday, August 31st. Call the church and we'll arrange to pick up your goods, if that will help. There has never been a shortage of volunteers -- happy volunteers, helping volunteers, volunteers eager to see others and have a conversation with a congregant or a shopper. I see the church at one of its best moments -- people working together happily, eagerly and energetically, for a common purpose, and being blessed in the process, and the proceeds from the sales being put to good use to bless others. And I see the church building, put to good use, a welcoming, reasonably accessible gathering spot for the many.

Thursday, as I went about my day, many significant conversations happened. Someone came to the sale and invited me to conversation; a conversation that was encouraging and affirming and restored my soul. Another conversation with an attendee will result in a truckload of goods from an elderly person's household, a person who will no longer be able to use the items. And I'm excited with anticipation as some of the goods coming are yarns, fabrics and quilts needing to be completed. It will be crafter's paradise. However, the important part of the conversation is that the way in which the goods will be dispersed and proceeds used will be in keeping with how the elderly woman lived her life, in using her skills and passion in helping others, and that is important for her son.

I went grocery shopping mid-afternoon, a few hours earlier than normal; a lengthy conversation took place amid the delectable cheese section. I learned

how it has been during covid for some aging parishioners, and how important getting out among others is. Later that afternoon someone popped over to my home, obviously distressed; a listening ear and a hug were in order, so was a glimpse of beauty for the eyes; the individual left more at peace.

These are yet more glimpses of the church being the church – listening, encouraging, affirming, offering understanding and compassion, and caring for one another, and not necessarily in the church!

Something that is beautiful to me is how increasingly less homogeneous Holy Trinity is becoming, a sign that the Body of Christ is richly diverse, a sign that there is room for all, I hope. In the letter to the church at Ephesus, the writer is encouraging the church, that their unity is in Christ, that Christ is the one who breaks down the walls that divide, that Christ is the one who brings people together, no matter what the differences. Vs. 14 reads: *“For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.”* And a few verses later we hear: *“... the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God (vs. 20, 21).”*

The church, the community of faith is built upon the centrality of Jesus Christ, and hangs together in the Spirit. And the community of believers becomes the dwelling place for God. How awesome is that? In the Old Testament story, King David wants to build for God, a house, to house the holiest of holies, a place where God can dwell. And God speaks through the prophet Nathan to David, that that is not necessary; God has always moved with the people, sheltered in a tent; God does not need to be confined to a dwelling place, made of bricks and mortar, or wood. Is there something in our humanity that we think that a statutory dwelling is important to God? Or is the statutory dwelling more important to us, a place where we can hang a plaque, to identify some portion of it as ours?

Some time during the pandemic in some webinar, the issue of church membership arose. In a time where worship is online, and people follow the worship of some leader, can those who come online from overseas, be part of the membership of that church? Do the members of a church need to live in the community, or need to live in the same country? It also asks the question, what is a particular community of faith? Is it made up of those people who click on the link and then worship?

So, what is important to God? The building, or the community of faith who gather around the centrality of Christ? In a nomadic community, their beliefs held them together. In the village or the town, was there a need for the town church to be a central place to gather, and express one's faith? A couple of weeks ago I was down at my sister's in Tottenham, and we drove south of town and passed a new subdivision of homes that cost in the upper six figures. And my sister remarked that that small group of town homes now going up was in the location that had been set aside for a church; no church was interested in paying \$9 million for that space. A sign of the times?

Sonya Renee Taylor wrote a blog that went viral, around the time of initial talk about releasing community restrictions in the pandemic:

We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate, and lack. We should not long to return to normal, my friends. We have been given the opportunity to stitch together a new garment – one that fits all of humanity and nature (Resource, p. 103).

We have been given the opportunity for a new beginning, to build a community of faith where walls that divide are broken down, where the compassionate love of Christ is central, where generosity abounds, where Christ is our unity. The church is waiting for God's people to "rise up and be the change we need (song from The Many)." Are you up for this?

Let me conclude with another song, the words of which came to my mind only a few hours before it was time to record:

The church is wherever God's people are praising, singing God's goodness for joy on this day.

The church is wherever disciples of Jesus remember his story and walk in his way.

The church is wherever God's people are healing, caring for neighbours in sickness and need.

The church is wherever God's people are sharing the words of the Bible in gift and in deed.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving Creator, hear our prayer. Sometimes God, bad news surrounds us and it hard to find the good news stories. Sometimes we feel like Job, where there is continual loss and grief and bad news. Hear our prayers.

Hear our prayers for peoples all across our land whose lives have been disrupted by forest fires, where they have lost their homes, or where they have had to evacuate; where people with asthma have difficulty breathing because of the smoke that travels thousands of miles. We pray for the firefighters, we pray for relief workers who bring food and water, clothing and supplies.

Hear our prayers for those around the world whose lives have been affected by flooding – people in Windsor, Ontario; people in Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands. Hear our prayers for people whose homes and workplaces have been destroyed by tornado, negligence or fire– people in Barrie, Ontario, in Florida, in Bangladesh.

Hear our prayers for those who are sick, fighting cancer or depression, those who grieve, the perplexed and the confused. Hear our prayers for those who struggle with addictions and those who seek to find their way.

And hear our prayers of thanksgiving – thanksgiving for the songs of birds that wake us up and delight us throughout the day, for the sounds of young children's voices on the street as they visit grandparents for the first time in over a year; for

the sound of rain, gently falling and dripping from edges, and for the sound of rain, pelting on the roof. Thank you for the delights of music and laughter that gets into our soul. Thank you for the taste of fresh fruits and vegetables – like the first bite into a pie made from cherries from you own tree, like the taste of raspberries, or fresh tomatoes and cucumbers made into a zingy salad.

Hear our prayers of thanksgiving for family and friends who offer listening ears, thoughtful questions, wise suggestions, encouraging words and steadfast love. Hear our prayers, O God, and we continue to pray, Our Father...