

Sunday August 22, 2010 – Healing of the Church, The Bent Woman

Pray: God, I pray that you be in these words that I say. Where it is your word, may it touch those in the congregation here today? Where these words are merely mine, I pray that no harm would be done. Blessed be.

There she was. She was simply standing there among the crowd of others gathered that morning at the synagogue. She hadn't asked for anything. She wasn't interested in making a spectacle of herself. But he saw her all the same. He saw her small bent frame, crooked from 18 years of pain. 18 years and no hope of ever returning to her previous, even glorious state of youthful sprightliness, the memory of which made her current state that much harder to bear. Yet, her lack of hope was hardly one of despair but rather a deeply mustered sense of resolve. She would keep on, keeping on, as day turned to week turned to year, doing what little she could still do. Yet, he sensed her. He knew that she still had life in her, that her purpose had not yet run its course. He knew, perhaps, that younger folk might yet learn some wisdom at her knee, that the love she fostered might still give life to another human soul crying out for help. So he spoke to her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and began praising God. Thus the church was healed.

On our mission trip a few weeks ago, one of our vesper services was centered on the Corinthians passage about the body of Christ and we contemplated what it meant to us to be Christ's hands and feet in this world. I don't remember exactly how we got to from point A to point B, but I remember asking the youth the question: Why shouldn't we just let the church die, the capital "C" church, not just our little home congregations but also our little home congregations? Why should we bother working to make sure that there is a church to hand off to the next generation? You know, it's funny, but no one is more aware of the lack of young faces in a congregation than the few youth who are present.

We, and I can count my aging self in that "we" as my generation is also underrepresented in our mainline churches, we are sometimes lonely, sometimes feeling like we're suckers as we know that most of our friends (and yes, I speak for mine, too) are at home sleeping in or out playing, out doing something else. Where are all the young people? Are they missing out on something or am I? One persistent question in my mind at least has been: how many more generations will the church, at least the mainline denominational churches, be around?

The youth on our mission trip had a bunch of good reasons for why we should keep the church from dying. I realize that it is a stark question, but sometimes we need to be pushed so that we can push back. Another way to put it would be: how is the church still relevant? Or better still: what do you love about the church and why do

you hope it will be around for future generations? Best yet: What about the church makes you want to take action, bring someone new to church, or tell the world how wonderful it really is? Take out those blank sheets of yellow paper and write down some of the reasons that you love coming to church and some of the reasons that you think the church needs to exist into the future... After you have written some ideas down, turn to your neighbors and share what you wrote, perhaps they will spark something that you haven't thought of, write those on your paper, too. ...What did you come up with? Share a few out loud.(take thoughts from the congregation)(i.e. community, service, collective help for those in need, a support system, philanthropic teachings, faith stories, one of the last places that generations mix, etc.) Great! We have our motivation!

You know, the authors of the books in the bible didn't write their prose expecting future preachers to pontificate on five sentences at a stretch. Like other authors of great works, they intended the stories to be of a piece and elaborate on ideas from one paragraph to the next. Luke is no exception. Indeed the entirety of Chapter 13 seems to come together to convict the religious establishment of complacency. The parable that precedes this story of the bent woman is about the fruitless fig tree. The land owner had planted a fig tree on his property but it wasn't bearing fruit.

He went angrily to the gardener and proclaimed "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" But the gardener begged for one more year to see if it might yet still bear good fruit after being tended with healing care. After that, well, then, fruitless, it would get cut down.

We know if we read the whole book of Luke, that time and again Jesus was frustrated with the fruitless legalisms of the religious leaders. Like the tree that wouldn't bear fruit and the woman who could no longer stand, healing was needed. We are not to remain an institution for the sake of the institution. We are not to take up precious resources that way. Christ wants us to be whole and doing his work in the world. Christ is the gardener.

Next, in the story of the bent woman we see the actual healing. And then in the parables that follow this story we hear the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast – comparing the kingdom of God to these small things that work such wonders. It is dependency on that which is unseen where we will find healing, but we must also be willing to change greatly through that healing. Yeast, when we let it do its job, never leaves the dough flat the way it had been before.

These parables are followed by a warning in the lesson of the narrow door: that many whom we don't expect will be admitted to the final feast; whereas those complacent in their faith might not. Finally, we hear Jesus lament for Jerusalem, the epicenter of his own faith tradition: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"

Is the church also dying, as Christ foretold that the temple religion of Judah would? It might be. I have spoken with many pastors and pastors in training, lay leaders and congregation members over the course of many years and I have found that most of us feel, at least from time to time, like we are rearranging the deck chairs on the titanic.

We feel irrelevant to a world that finds comfort in the arms of consumerism, or untethered spirituality, or dogmatic legalisms. Do we mourn the passing of the church before it has truly passed? I have.

I had pretty much given up on the church when God set in motion the notion of Ripple last year. It was then that something, something beyond myself, brought me back to hope. The very idea that Ascension, this small but faithful congregation, would so generously, spend so lavishly on the youth, the future of this church, caught me off guard. Really!? I thought to myself. A congregation that gives more weight to its future than its past?! Incredible! A church that is more about doing Christ's work rather than preserving Christ's memory?! Fantastic! The more we talked last June, the more eye opening it became for me. Willing to take chances, willing to adapt to the needs of tomorrow's church leaders, excited, even, about new possibilities in ministry! When I arrived I was further delighted to learn that another core passion of this congregation is its dedication to social justice and especially environmental stewardship. These are issues that speak to the heart of my generation and younger. As I tell our youth again and again, Christ was a radical, a revolutionary. He was a change agent with a passion for compassion. This church seems to embrace this radical Christ. Your mission committee is constantly feeding the hungry, raising funds for those in need, finding ways for the community as a whole to reach beyond themselves toward Jesus who is almost always found among the poor. Your Care for Creation Committee is constantly finding new ways to bring wholeness back to the world around us so that the seventh generation from now might have a beautiful world to live in and love. Your compassion for one another shows itself in gatherings that happen after worship, at potluck dinners, and even at committee meetings. This community loves one another. The most beautiful testimony that I have ever heard about any congregation ever came from our young adopted son Dylan who has said again and again that Sunday mornings here and Tuesday nights at Ripple are the most peaceful parts of his week. He feels safe here. You have created this safe haven. And it has helped me regain my faith in the church, in the future of the church.

But radicals and change agents are never universally welcome. Jesus was NOT welcome among the guardians, those traditionalists who guard their long held, finely tuned rituals for fear of losing something precious. Change is not easy. As a change agent myself I can also confess that when someone moves my cheese I grumble, too. If Facebook changes their layout one more time, I swear, I'm going back to MySpace! Does that sound familiar? Does anyone here know anybody like that? If Ascension changes their Sunday school layout one more time, I swear.... Hmm... so we grumble. That's life. It changes. No one knows that better than our oldest generation here. Am I right? Who here was around before there were cell phones? How about before there was internet? Who was around before there was TV? Is anyone here who remembers a time before electricity was pumped into your community? I know my grandfather who would have been 96 this year spoke of life on the farm before it went electric. Not only has everything changed in our lifetimes, but it is changing faster than ever before.

Brian McLaren, one of or perhaps THE primary voice of the emerging church has a great quote and I've used it a lot. "If you have a new world, you need a new church. You have a new world." How we move forward into the future together will depend a whole bunch on who is willing to stick around to help make it happen.

Some folks will get rubbed the wrong way, some will get frustrated, and some will want to leave. But community is worth sticking together through the hard parts, just like marriage. And yes, kind of like marriage, we rub each other the wrong way once and a while, but in the end it is not unlike being in a rock tumbler. We find our sanctification in community; it is an integral part of the faith journey. Two weeks ago I was invited to attend Ascension's Worship and Music Committee retreat. We talked about making our worship service more engaging. We talked about what more engaging might mean and we had some good conversations about that. We agreed that not everyone will be happy with any change that is made. Yes, the kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and worked all through the dough. Yeast WILL change the dough, but what good is bread without yeast? Let me introduce the Veggie Tales Principle to you.

The concept of the Veggie Tales Principle comes from Dr. Len Sweet, a fairly well known author in the United Methodist Church who was also my professor for a one semester class I took in seminary called Multicultural Evangelism. I don't know if you are familiar with the Veggie Tales. They are a series of little videos where animated vegetables act and sing biblical messages. Well, Professor Sweet's own children loved Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber along with all of their other veggie friends. The children would sing along with the films and learn about God's love for them through these simple stories. But personally, Professor Sweet would have rather made a garden salad out of these irritating, musically wanting characters. The videos

drove him crazy. He couldn't stand being in the room while they were playing. But be that as it may, every time a new Veggie Tale came out, he went to the store to buy it for his kids. It was more important to him that his children, the next generation, be raised with the stories and lessons of the bible than it was for his own personal tastes and preferences to be met. Thus was birthed the Veggie Tale Principle. The Principle is this: If there isn't something happening in your worship and your church that drives you absolutely crazy but reaches out to a member of a different age group then there is something inherently wrong with your church's ministry. If, on the other hand, you are finding that something does...well, you're probably doing something right. At Riverside Church in Manhattan, they teach their congregants that about 60% of each worship service should speak to them and the other 40% was for someone else. But the most amazing part is when we think that the ministry is for someone else and yet it broadens us, too!

Jesus healed her "And immediately she straightened up and praised God... Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." "We have our traditions, our rituals, and our rules. What was good enough for our elders will be good enough for you. And who is this upstart who is going about changing things?"

I think we often read the next line portraying Jesus with anger and frustration. The Lord answered him, "YOU HYPOCRITS!" ...But Jesus knew people, he knew their fears and their faults, their pain and their frustration. Sometimes I read Jesus more as the loving parent who can sympathize and even find amusement in the stupid sometimes infuriating actions of the humans that he loved.

What if, instead, we read it: And the Lord answered him (lovingly with a smile) "You hypocrites. (You think that Jesus doesn't know that we are all hypocrites? We're all hypocrites, Jesus knows.) You hypocrites. Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?... of course you do... Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" *Sigh* "Lighten up, people. Don't take yourself so, damned seriously." (And that's not a swear, Sarah, we do, I think, quite literally damn ourselves when we take ourselves too seriously.)

Ascension has made an investment in the future. I cannot tell you how delighted this makes me. But you and I both know that we are still losing our young adults. The work is not yet done. There is still plenty of room for growth. Christ calls us to live into a radical future where the Holy Spirit surprises us and makes all things new. What about the church, this church makes you want to take action, bring someone new to church, or tell the world how wonderful it really is? Now I want you to go back to your piece of paper and write about what you

and we are going to do about recreating the church for the future generations, so that all that we love about church can be handed down... Take this piece of paper home and post it on your fridge, or on a mirror, or somewhere you will see it in the next few weeks. Then I challenge you to act on it because if God's Holy Spirit is the yeast then we are the dough, the hands and feet of Christ in the world, and therefore we must be the ones to act. After worship today during fellowship time, talk with a few others about what you wrote on your paper. This, too, is a function of good community. We share the vision together.

For me, this passage is one of hope. It is one of questioning the system. It is radical. Radical love. Radical hope. It calls us to find forgiveness in our own hypocrisy, it calls us to bear good fruit in a changing world and not be afraid of the change that HAS to happen, and it calls us to be healed even when we weren't looking for the cure.

But although it has been at least 18 years of decline for the mainline churches of North America we are not beyond hope. Perhaps our children have left and forgotten to bring their own children back to worship with us. Perhaps our former glories are tarnished by the hatred that seeps out of the mouths of our cousins in faith. Perhaps our back is bent from years of unnoticed service and we do not seem the community of love that once we were. But Jesus has sensed us. He knows that we still have life in us, that our purpose has not yet run its course. He knows, perhaps, that younger folk might yet learn some wisdom at our knee, that the love we foster might still give life to another human soul crying out for help. So he speaks to us, "Children, children, you are set free from your ailment." Then he puts his hands on us, and immediately we straighten up and begin praising God. Thus the church was healed.