

The Healthy, Vibrant, Thriving Church: Reaches out to Others

Message for Sunday, September 9, 2018
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

Children's Message:

I try walking around, while looking in a mirror. I can't see where I'm going; I can't see people around me; I can see only myself.

I bumped into someone and said, "Where did you come from? I didn't see you. You should be more careful and watch where you're going: you walked right into me!" Of course it was *me* who needs to be more careful.

That's what temptation is like: I'm focussed on *me*. I'm not concerned about others or about God; just myself.

Put the mirror aside, so now I can look out. I can see where I'm going, and who's out there.

Message: "The Healthy, Vibrant, Thriving Church: Reaches out to Others"

1) Everyone faces temptation; look how Jesus responded

Three of the Gospels tell us that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness before he began his ministry. He was tempted to focus on himself:

- to turn stones into bread to satisfy *his* hunger
- have all the power and wealth for *himself*
- to jump off the peak of the Temple and make the angels rescue him, showing off how great *he* is.

I think we can say that the essence of temptation is to focus on ourselves. In fact, this is what sin is: rejecting God's way, and choosing our own way instead.

In response to each temptation, Jesus responds by putting God first:

- It is written, "Man does not live on bread alone [but on every word that comes from the mouth of God]" - Matthew's ending].
- It is written, "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only."
- It is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

For the rest of his life, that is exactly what Jesus did. And he commands us to do the same, as his followers: "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given unto you" [Matthew 6:33].

There's nothing new in what I've said so far. It's the same gospel message that has been preached for generations. What I want to do today is to explore what this gospel would look like, not in a person's life, but in the life of a church. Like our church. Actually, I'm going to continue this over the next several Sundays, each week looking at a different area.

2) Today: The healthy, vibrant, thriving church reaches out to others

Go back to the beginning of the church. Jesus has been killed, then raised from the dead, and then he ascends into heaven. Jesus leaves them with these final words, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" [Acts 1:8].

Throw a pebble into a pond. Splash! One ripple, a mere two inches from the point of impact. Then a second ripple, further away, and bigger in size. Then a third, and another, and another, and another... until even the most distant bullrushes sway to the rocking water, and the croaking frogs are silenced. Who would ever have thought that such a small pebble could so dramatically influence such a large pond?

The message of Christ to the trembling apostles is like that that pebble. They are the smallest, least noticeable, least powerful religious force in Jerusalem, let alone the world. Their entire annual budget is not enough to buy a loaf of bread, much less give any away to feed others.

In a single day, their worship attendance rises from 12 to 3,000. In a year they have missions in the slums of every city in Judea. In two years they have leapt over the racial barriers to Samaria, and joined hands with former enemies. In three years they are influencing public policy. By the end of the century they are the major religious force shaping the decisions of an empire.

How? Because they learned the basic law of Christian life: “Churches, like people, are healthiest when they reach out to others, rather than worry about themselves.”

See how they put it into practice.

Acts 2:45, Good News Bible:

They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed.

Instead of worrying about bread for themselves, some of the members sold their belonging just to make sure they got bread on somebody else’s table.

Acts 2:46-47, Good News Bible:

Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.

3) A story about people in church

To change from an institutional church into a mission church requires a complete change in priorities, in how people look at things. Let me illustrate this by describing two church-goers at a typical Sunday service.

Meet Joe and Jane. They have been married for 10 years. They have two children, the oldest about 6 years old. Neither Joe nor Jane have been to church since they left home to be married. Jane has decided the kids need Sunday School.

Now Joe and Jane, deep inside, don’t really want to go to church. Each works at a career all week, sacrifices their times to their kids all Saturday, and desperately need Sunday to “sleep in” and “flake out.” Nevertheless, something is missing, and they sense it as an ill-defined emptiness... a lack of some purpose or meaning. But there are obstacles in their way.

The first obstacle Joe and Jane face is that they have to clean the snow off the car and drive two kilometers to get to church. The second obstacle they face is that upon arriving they don’t know which door to enter, they find no clear signs

pointing to the nursery, and the people standing around are too busy talking to help them find the bathroom. By now Joe and Jane are wishing they were somewhere else.

When Joe and Jane find a seat, they have to sit with strangers. The bulletin has so much church jargon that it may as well be in Sanskrit. Periodically, the congregation reads together, stands up together, sits down together. By the time Joe and Jane figure it out, the others are finished. The parts of the service involving children or lay readers are hard to hear, and they are easily distracted. The preacher talks a lot about God, but says nothing about how to deal with their problems at work. The hard wooden seats are incredibly uncomfortable. By now Joe and Jane are fit to be tied.

After the service, they are glad to hear about refreshments downstairs. But only a couple of people talk with them; most of the others are talking with their friends. They grab the kids, and go out the way they came in. On the way home in the car, Joe tells Jane he will never go through that torture again. “I didn’t get a darn thing out of it, except a headache.”

Now meet Fred and Flo. They are long time members of the church Joe and Jane just visited. They cannot even remember what it is like to not go to church. They don’t mind driving to church because their friends will be there. They don’t mind the bulletin, because all the code words make perfect sense to them. They don’t mind the hard pews, because discipline is a part of their religious life. And since they know the building as well as their home, they don’t need any signs for where the bathrooms are. Their primary concern for new members is to raise the financial base of the institution so that they can finally fix the plumbing. When someone tells them about Joe and Joan’s brief visit, they reply, “If they aren’t willing to be more committed than that, they may as well stay home.”

In a nut shell, here is the reason why churches die. Joe and Joan came because they were spiritually in need, and looked for the church to give them something. The church members wanted to receive Joe and Joan only because the institution was in need, and they hoped the

newcomers would provide it. They were focussed on what they needed for themselves, rather than how they could reach out to outsiders.

Here at St. Paul's, we are already doing some of that outreach. We give to Community Cupboard and the Benevolent Fund through the year, and give White Gifts at Christmas time. A group of people provide fellowship and fun at Stirling Towers on Tuesdays. Daybreak welcomes seniors from the whole area on Fridays.

There's so much potential among us here! You don't need to have a committee if you want to do something. Just grab hold of someone whose heart burns with the same passion as yours... and do it!

The inward looking institutional church is very different from the outward looking New Testament church. In the early church, it was the Holy Spirit that gave the people the power to reach out to others. It was the Holy Spirit that enabled them to speak in other languages, so that foreigners would feel welcome. It was the Holy Spirit that increased their worship attendance from 12 to 3,000. It was the Holy Spirit that multiplied the shared bread to give away to the poor. It was the Holy Spirit that made it more important to make new friends than maintain old friendships.

A story is told of a Sunday School class up front in the church service, ready to recite the Apostles Creed. Each child had memorized a phrase. "I believe in God the Father Almighty!" proclaimed the first little girl. "And in Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord!" repeated another, and so on, phrase by phrase. Suddenly, after proclaiming judgment for the quick and the dead, there was silence. The children looked at one another. The teacher looked puzzled. The minister looked embarrassed. Finally one little girl said shyly, "Teacher, the boy who believes in the Holy Spirit is missing."

So often it is true of our United Churches: the people who would be empowered by the Holy Spirit not only to be witnesses to the ends of the earth, but even to their neighbours, and to

welcome them to church on Sunday morning, are missing.

Remember Fred and Flo, the long-time church members? They assume that church is a long, bureaucratic, disciplined process. Entry is gained through initiation rites. Full recognition requires years of committee work. The culmination is a touching Memorial Service at the end.

There is some truth in that. Dedicated members are valuable. But that isn't what Joe and Joan came looking for. They needed a powerful, relevant, inspiring encounter with an unknown God that would excite them and motivate them for the rest of the week. No doubt they will have to learn something from Fred and Flo about patience and discipline. But at the same time, Fred and Flo need to look up from their papers and remember that, after all, this exciting, life-changing encounter with God is what church is all about.

Next Steps:

- Pray. Ask for love: to care more about making guests feel welcome, than my own comfort.
- Pray. Ask for passion: to be excited about the good news of Jesus Christ.
- Pray. Ask for wisdom: to respond to opportunities to tell others this good news, and invite them to come with you to worship.