

The Healthy, Vibrant, Thriving Church: Accepts the Cost of Discipleship

Message for Sunday, September 23, 2018
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-6, 15-17; 18:9-15; 21:1-7

Children's Message: Luke 14:25-33, count the cost of following Jesus.

An old legend tells of a beloved queen who invited all her friends to come to her birthday party, asking each person to bring a bottle of their best wine. A barrel was placed at the palace door, and upon entering each person was to pour their gift of wine into the barrel. It was to be a symbol of the surrender of their very best, out of loyalty to the queen.

One guest looked over his stock of choice wines, and found it hard to part with even one bottle. He thought, "I will fill the bottle with water and pour it into the barrel. No one will know the difference."

Later, at the party, the queen was overjoyed when she saw the barrel full. She invited all the people to gather round and drink. The queen took a glass, opened the tap of the barrel—but all that came out was water! Everyone had done the same thing!

Jesus invites us to follow him, and to bring our very best: not our best wine, but something even better—to bring ourselves!

Jesus says we must love him more than anything or anyone else. We must put him first in our lives.

Message: "The Healthy, Vibrant, Thriving Church: Accepts the Cost of Discipleship"¹

1) Can an Old Church Grow?

Sarah has a question for St. Paul's Church. Over 3,500 years have passed by now, but Abraham's wife has a question for our congregation.

Remember Abraham and Sarah? God made a covenant with Abram when Abram was 99 years old. The covenant was that it Abram would obey

God, then God would make his descendants "exceedingly numerous." So serious was God in his promise, that God changed Abram's name to "Abraham", which in Hebrew means "Ancestor of a Multitude."

There was only one hitch. Abram and Sarah didn't have any children. He was 99 years old, she was 90, they didn't have any children, and God promised to make their descendants "exceedingly numerous." It's no wonder Abraham laughed. Genesis 17:17 says he fell down on the ground, from laughing so hard. Sarah's reaction when she heard the news was the same [Genesis 18:12].

But God said, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" [Genesis 18:14]. A year later, Sarah did have a son, and he was the first in the line of millions to follow. His name was "Isaac," which in Hebrew means "laughter," in recognition that it was God who had the last laugh.

Here is the question that Sarah asks us today: Can a church that is more than 100 years old have a child? Can an old church grow and thrive? We may look around at one another and laugh. Instead, look to God and listen: "Is anything too wonderful for God?"

2) The Cost of Being a Mission Church

Today is the second in a series of messages on the theme of *The Healthy, Vibrant, Thriving Church*. Two weeks ago, you may remember, I said the main reason churches die is that they are more concerned with institutional survival, than reaching out to outsiders, and providing for their needs. (To jog your memory: that's when I used a mirror as a symbol of focussing on ourselves.)

Today: the second reason why institutional churches die is this: they are not willing to pay the price of life. Jesus calls us to give our very best. Not just as individuals, but together as the church. That can be scary—downright dangerous! We would rather keep the best to ourselves—like the people coming to the queen's birthday party.

¹ Credit: The basis for this series of message on the healthy church comes from Tom Bandy.

Alright, let's get specific. What does Jesus call us to do, as a church, as we strive to follow him faithfully?

a) Reach out to others

I talked last time about focussing on how we can serve others, instead of worrying about our own needs. I don't want that to be a "one-shot" wonder that is forgotten the next week. That is still the primary focus for us as a mission church.

b) Invite your friends to church, tell them about your faith

People are always wondering about how they should go about getting new people to come to church. It's as if we are closing our eyes to the obvious answer: bring our friends. The answer to church growth does not lie in the charisma of the minister, the quality of the music, the facilities of the Sunday School, or even good weather. These are important, and they help. But the real answer lies in the courage of individual Christians who dare to share their faith with their neighbours and friends. Invite them. Bring them. Show them that Jesus Christ is vital to your life and, because they care about you, they will become interested in your faith.

People say they don't talk about religion, it just causes arguments. I agree. *Don't* talk about religion when you want to invite someone. Talk about yourself. Talk about the difference knowing Jesus makes in your life. I know it's scary to talk about this, because it's so personal, so private. But Jesus calls us to be his witnesses. The church which is scared to witness is the church that will eventually, inevitably die.

c) Invest in your church

I started with the story of the queen who invited her friends to a party, asking them to bring their best wine. Jesus calls us to bring our very best also.

We do this with our offerings of money, to support the mission of the whole church. Jesus said, "Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also" [Matthew 6:21].

d) Look for ways to serve

I am becoming more and more convinced that the *real* work of the church is done, not in meetings, but when people are serving others. Sure, we need some

planning, someone to make decisions. But the real joy is found when you do something to help someone else, when you have an opportunity to live out our gospel of love. This could be in teaching Junior Church, in visiting shut-ins, in helping someone learn to read and write, helping refugees begin a new life in Canada, and in a thousand other ways.

e) Your greatest gift: yourself

We give our greatest offering when we give ourselves. When you fully commit yourself to Jesus Christ, and ask God to work in you, wonderful things can happen. Jesus gave us this promise:

John 14:12, New International Version:

"I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to Father."

As long as I have been here as your pastor, I have preached about people committing their lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. In most churches, we tend to hear lots about the need to become a member, to get involved in the work of the church, to give financially, and so on. Those things are important, and I often touch on them. But they are secondary. The first and foremost thing is your own relationship with Jesus Christ. Without that inside, all the other stuff is just decoration on the outside.

f) Following Jesus Requires the Leap of Faith

Norman Vincent Peale wrote, "If you think little, and believe little, and pray little, you will come out little. But if you think big, and believe big, and pray big, you will come out big." To start thinking like that requires a leap of faith.

Someone once said that there are two kinds of church people: the "saints" and the "aint's". The saints think big, believe big, and pray big. The "ain'ts" think little, believe little, and pray little. They are the ones whose every move is hedged by limitations, and every action is determined by fear.

"It ain't possible!", they say. It just won't work. Sure, Jesus said to go into all the world, feed the hungry, and forgive our enemies — but it won't work.

"We ain't done it that way before!", they say. Every innovative program, every creative idea is

immediately rejected. I saw a quote last week from Albert Einstein: “Stay away from negative people. They have a problem for every solution.”

“I ain’t gonna help!”, they say. They’ve served their time. The task is too hard. They don’t have the talent for it. We don’t have the money for it. They’re too old, too young, too short, too tall, or too bald. Whatever the excuse, they ain’t gonna do it.

Well, the “saints” have a message for the “ain’ts”. It is possible. There are new ways to do it. And the power to do it is not dependent upon your talent, but upon your surrender to the will of God. That is the way of the cross.

Next Steps:

Jesus calls us to complete surrender of our lives to him. That’s a *big* commitment! Pray, and ask Jesus for help:

- to be sincere in this commitment
- to be faithful
- when (not if) we fail, to ask forgiveness and keep on
- to *enjoy* life with Jesus. It’s not drudgery; it’s the abundant life Jesus promised!