

October 21, 2018

Church. Why. Bother

This morning I am inviting you into a three week reflection on the theme “Church: Why Bother?” This morning the focus is really upon “why bother with spiritual pursuits” or, more specifically, “why bother with Christianity?” Next week, on the occasion of McClure’s 52nd anniversary we will consider, “Why bother with McClure?” On Nov. 4th we will conclude this series by reflecting on the question, “Why should the world bother with the church?”

As I was ending my fifteen year tenure with St. Martin’s I was beset by the thought that the church of the future would only survive if people got in touch with the very deep and personal experiences of their faith life. One Sunday morning I became quite impassioned in posing this question to the congregation. The following week a woman phoned to say that she and her partner had appreciated my question, had gone home and in discussion discovered that they did not know why they attended church, and concluded that they would no longer be coming. That is not the consequence I intend by this sermon series, although I do hope that you might go home, think, and perhaps discuss with another person your engagement with the Christian faith.

In many ways the response to the question, “Why bother with Christianity?” can only be answered in a personal way. A few moments ago we sang that old hymn, “Just As I am.” If you ever attended a Billy Graham crusade you will know that it was during the singing of this hymn that people streamed from the aisles to come forward and commit their lives to the way of Christ. As I watched these events – once in person and often on television – I wondered what motivated people to come forward. Was it the appeal of the gospel message? Was it a deep yearning to connect with a power greater than themselves? Was it a response to a time of personal crisis? Or, was it simply a “herd response,” a kind of mass hysteria that made people want to be included. I hunch the reason was different for every person.

It is because the response to the question “Why bother” will be unique for every person that I feel compelled to share just a little of my own spiritual journey. I was raised in a minimally religious family. My mother occasionally attended church, as much because of the social expectations, as for any other reason. My father declared that the church was filled with hypocrites and chose not to be part of that crowd. I don’t think either of them read the Bible or maintained a regular prayer life. They did want to be good parents; however; so during the years in which parents put their children to bed, they made it a part of their routine to recite a prayer with me each evening. As best as I can remember this was the origin of my God-consciousness.

I was a shy kid, a little afraid of the world and an introvert by temperament. My path to school took me through an Anglican Church yard which, when I was six, seemed massive. I entered beyond a hedge as if to enter the rectory, but took a turn on to the path which led past a long church hall and finally to the doors of the church itself. There was a little path worn through the bushes by which I could exit back on to the street. Each day as I entered beyond the hedge I had a sense that God was with me. Even as

a young child I found myself praying – albeit immature and selfish prayers – yet, praying just the same. It was as if God was as close as my breath, as if God was my friend and protector, and would never leave me alone. I am reminded of the closing words of the United Church Creed, “In life, in death, in life beyond death, we are not alone. God is with us.” Over the subsequent decades I have studied the scriptures, read theological books, developed a highly questioning and skeptical mind yet, beyond reason, I continue to sense that something Holy-other is near to me. As I sat in the hospital room of my dying mother I looked out the window and saw the spire of St. Mary’s Church and thought, I am not alone. Often, as I sit on the deck at the lake, and stair out upon the prairie landscape, there arises within me an intuitive realization that I live in the midst of a God-power. I feel God, even when I don’t understand God.

Involvement in the church came years after those childhood beginnings. I met Don Cann in Grade seven. His father was a lay preacher and their family attended the neighbourhood United Church each Sunday. I was invited to join them. To keep this story short, let me simply say that I was swept up into the community of the church. This introverted kid with only a few select friends and little confidence was suddenly welcomed into Sunday school and youth group, encouraged by countless adults, invited to workshops and asked to be the youth representative to the Board. In addition to my mystical experience of God I was now welcomed into an intense experience of community where there was a common acknowledgment of God-power. To this day, “Christians” have been my people. I met my wife in church, our best couple friends, my weekly breakfast buddy, my work mates – almost every single person in my life has come to me through the Christian community.

The third chapter of my journey occurred at St. Andrew’s College. St. Andrew’s expanded my understanding of scripture such that the themes of escape from slavery, care for the widow and orphan, welcoming the rejected and seeing Jesus in the “least among us” became the window through which I have looked at the world. To sum it up in the words of the Latin American Bishops I realized that, “God has a preferential option for the poor.”

In our spiritual conversation groups this week I asked why people still bother with church and the Christian faith. Within each group, a version of these three reasons was given. Church is a place for friendship and community. Church is a place where we sense and acknowledge a *source* for our spirituality nurtured in music, described in sermons and held up in prayer. And finally, but not least, the Christian tradition provides a road map for how one can live their life for the good of all. Do any of these testimonies resonate with you? Are you here because you belong to a community of people who know and care for you? Is this a place where the mystery of life and the sense of the God-power is nurtured? Does the moral teaching of the Judeo-Christian story focusing as it does on love, justice and peace shape how you live your life? Is there more? What draws *you* here? What do *you* hope for? What do *you* find?

This morning’s scripture comes to us from the spiritually charged atmosphere of the Jesus era, the years from about 30 to 100CE. Having brushed up against this charismatic teacher who spoke with compassion and hope people like Peter and Andrew, James and John drop everything to follow Jesus. There were no polite

handshakes at the door, no weeks of confirmation classes, no Bible passages to memorize - it was a spontaneous, intuitive response to the life and message of Jesus. Livelihoods were set aside, fishing nets abandoned, even family members left behind, as they responded to this irresistible message. Their decision was immediate, the moment crackled with urgency.

Although the Eunuch in the second scripture is from a far-away country and had never met Jesus, the story which Phillip shared was so captivating, so enlivening, that this traveler implores his carriage driver to stop so that he might be baptized that very moment in the nearby waters. The Eunuch was converted, he was convicted by the message of hope and justice and he urgently wanted to immerse himself in this life.

Urgency is the watchword of these passages. Peoples' lives were changed because of their encounter with Jesus and his message. I fear we have lost our urgency. The church could be a place of personal and social transformation but we drone on at meetings, we invest our energy in teas and suppers, and we are so terribly domestic on Sunday mornings that we hesitate to speak to the stranger. How can we communicate the care of this community, the belief that we are not alone, and the passion to transform the world? The world so desperately needs our message – that community is more important than consumption; that beholding the mystery of life is greater than the latest technology; that the destitute on 20th Street and the refugees from Syria and so many others trapped by the machinations of the elite need to hear God's promise, "Let my people go!"

My God, this week the leader of the most powerful nation in the world used the word "horseface" to describe a woman caught up in the sex trade. Just leadership is so wanting in our world at present. The leadership of the Christian church needs to join with other justice seeking peoples to say enough to those who abuse power. We must demand that love for neighbour be the centre and touchstone of life. I come to church on Sunday morning to be reminded to be reminded that the power of the God who is love is the centre and source for living – may God forbid that I ever forget the centrality of love. Amen.