

We are Not Alone

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Scripture: Mark 1: 29 – 39 and 1 Corinthians 9: 16 – 23

Last week Reverend Norm Esdon started his sermon with how scary it is for preachers to stand in front of you and interpret God's message for us. Multiply that a few times when you are a chemist, who has more familiarity with science, data, graphs and organizational structure than the scripture. You will see some of that influence in this sermon in setting the context for how I see the church today. It is a privilege to be here with you this morning.

We all read scripture through the lens of our own experience. In the reading from Mark today, my interest was drawn to two things ... the first is the sense of urgency in Jesus getting into his role as a preacher/healer. Mark starts with Jesus baptism, then time in the wilderness to contemplate on his new role, then he recruited disciples and as a verse in the scripture just prior to the section that I read this morning says Jesus "lost no time in getting to the meeting place in Capernaum" and started to teach. Following that, Jesus went to Simon and Andrew's house, healed Simon's mother-in-law and many more who showed up that evening ... he prayed in a secluded spot and then the next day he went on to meeting places throughout Galilee. One conclusion I have drawn from this account is that as followers of Jesus, the model we are given is one of reflection/action/reflection/action in an ongoing way. It is not all reflection and prayer and it is not all action – it is both. I will come back to this theme later.

Secondly, I was interested in where Jesus went to teach In *The Message, the Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene Peterson, the word "meeting place" is used instead of "synagogue". "Synagogue is a Greek word that literally means a gathering of people but also refers to a place of assembly" (Chad Spigel, Assistant Professor, Trinity University, San Antonio Texas from his book 2012). It was a place that also served as a school, a place of communal meals, political meetings and also as the worship space. It reminds me of the wide range of roles played today in rural communities where the churches are often the only public building in the area where the community can gather. Increasingly, being a community space is also becoming part of the life of urban churches.

If you think about it, it is remarkable that churches/parishes have survived for so long ... the Christian religion were taken over by the Roman Empire under Constantine as a state religion which, as an aside, I think is almost impossible for us to imagine – think about how you would feel if the Kingston City Council were to decide how you would practice communion!!! When the roman empire declined, parishes sprang up or were reactivated and that basic pattern has continued to today. Parish structure survived the split of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches and the reformation and here we are today. The expression of the Christian church has changed but the fundamental structure has lasted for centuries. However, that model has been under stress since the 1960's.

Writers on religious trends, Phyllis Tickle and Diana Butler Bass, have noted that the different eras just mentioned ... shift from state to parish structure, the split between Catholic and Orthodox, the reformation, and today occur in 500-year time spans. That is the shift from state to parish structure occurred in about 500 CE, the split about 1000 CE ... the reformation in 1500 CE and the current shift in the 2000's. Tickle has written about these events in terms of "housecleaning" ... a time when some things are let go of and new patterns established. She and Butler Bass think that we have been in another transition in the church over the past 50 years, a transition that is still continuing. So, what does the current transition look like? This is where the data bit comes in.

When we think of "church" we tend to think of our own congregation which is appropriate and natural. We tend to expect that our experience is the norm. However, there is a wider context in which our individual congregations exist ... in other words, we are not alone and our experience is not the only experience. The Pew Research Center in the USA is an organization that has collected data on churches for many years and, thankfully, makes their reports public. In the USA they have documented the decline in Christian church membership and attendance over many years. The current pattern in the USA is a slow decline in membership and attendance with a sharp rise in people not affiliated with any faith group. The faith community is aging and the percent of non-affiliated millennials (25 to 40) is about 36% compared to the overall average non-affiliation of 20% across the USA.

Similar trends exist in Canada. Stats Can results show that evangelicals and the non-affiliated are the fastest growing groups in Canada. For example, those who identify as not affiliated were 12% in the 1991 census, 16.5% in the 2001 census, and 24% in the 2011 census. So that means there are 7.8 million people in Canada with no church affiliation. Evangelical Christians are also growing currently representing about 5% of the total Christian membership.

The decline has been happening primarily in the mainline churches. The United Church peaked in its membership around 1967 and has been in decline ever since. If you plot membership over time you would see an arc that shows great increases in the 50's and sixties ... when a lot of new churches were built or added to and a steady decline ever since. I have collected data on the number of givers in United Churches in Kingston from 2003 to 2014 – eleven years. There were 2089 giving family units in 2003 and 1367 in 2014 a reduction of over 700 givers. The loss in givers is equivalent to the loss of two large congregations, the combined size of Chalmers and SSUC. So, the loss of 700 givers has been absorbed by other churches in Kingston and mainly by the larger congregations.

So why am I talking about this depressing news!!!! In part I have raised this story of the Christian church to help us see that we are in a time of change in Western Europe and North America I also want to help us see that as an individual, it is not any one individual's fault, as congregations... it is not our fault ... it is not the fault of the ministers It is not God's fault It just is. There is a transition going on in relation to how we live out our Christian traditions and practices.

So, as Christians in 2018, what do we do about it? I would go back to my reflection on the actions of Jesus as outlined in Mark Jesus meditated/prayed and then took action, then meditated again and acted again. There is a lot of praying/meditating/discerning going on in The United Church right now and I find that encouraging. Over the past about 6 years The United Church has supported the EDGE network, which has worked with both our congregations. EDGE has been pro-active in helping congregations in visioning and considering ideas outside the box Many congregations and courts of the church have been in this discerning mode and there are emerging signs of action. Some congregations have looked outside their walls and partnered with groups in the community, particularly in the areas of social justice. For financial stability, many have converted part of their property to housing developments – both commercial and subsidized. Ones that have interested me include Trinity St Paul's in Toronto who have filled their excess capacity with arts and justice organizations. A model much like the first century when synagogues and churches performed the function of community centres and worship centres. Some rural churches along the St. Lawrence River have established cooperatives where 4 to 6 church congregations hire one minister, who along 5 lay worship leaders, lead six worship services every Sunday. The most striking example of a new relationship is the agreement by the Board of Carleton University to negotiate the purchase of Dominion Chalmers United Church in Ottawa for arts groups, a performance venue and community hub with the expectation that the congregation will continue to worship there.

While there are a lot of changes in church administrative systems, there is not yet enough attention on how churches need to change to serve the spiritual needs of the unaffiliated ... those who are spiritual but not religiousthose who declare no affiliation with any church. A topic for another day.

So, we here at Chalmers and Sydenham Street are not alone in doing something different. We are not alone in the context of what is happening in other churches and we are not alone in being led by the Spirit to do a new thing.

What can we imagine God will lead us to? Perhaps a strong base from which we can each develop complementary missions.

Look at the ministry of teaching and healing that resulted from a called activist Jewish Rabi in the first century – amazing. What is God calling us to do?

Amen

I have chosen Deep in our Hearts with the hope that the music and words will help us to discern how we can engage in the Holy One's mission for us in our world today. We will remain seated to sing this prayerful hymn.