

June 3, 2018

“LOCATING THE CHURCH”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. C. Wayne Hilliker at Sydenham St. United Church - whilliker@cogeco.ca

Resonating scripture: 1 Corinthians 14: 8-15

At such a time, in such a place and on such an occasion as this, for me to speak at all, is to speak out of respect for that tradition of a long line of people--who have come to trust that there is at the centre of this universe and cosmos;

... a divinity who cannot be limited by one name,

...and a mysterious Holy Other, who has created us, who sustains us and who always wills to empower us.

In reading everything in the bulletin and listening to the announcements that were shared at the beginning of the service, although I can't speak for you, I am finding that just trying to take it all in, makes me a little exhausted and even a bit overwhelmed.

Alongside of that is the fact that we are coming to worship today, having had experienced the many days of beautiful sunshine of this past week. The result of such a context, is that our minds can easily start to drift-- especially when it comes to sermon time! It can even result, in some of us, nodding briefly off to sleep! Well, I just want you to know that if you kind of doze off to sleep during this sermon, I'm OK with that—Why? Because of a truth I learned from a preaching mentor of mine.

It seems he was in an airport in Kansas City years ago, waiting for a plane. He fell into conversation with a fellow from the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. This post-doctoral student was in the United States completing a study on the influence of conversation between doctors and nurses on patients in surgery when they are under anaesthesia.

The results of his study were so convincing that they were, from his point of view, beyond doubt. His discovery was that if the doctors and nurses were negative and gripey and grumpy during the surgery...then the patient in post-operative care was depressed and pessimistic. If the doctors and nurses were upbeat, happy, and cheerful during the surgery, then the patient in post-operative care was euphoric and optimistic and proceeded to recover quickly.

Well, the time came when my preaching mentor had to leave to catch his plane. He thanked the student immensely for sharing the results of his study. Somewhat surprised the student replied, *'Why, are you a doctor?'*

No, my mentor said, *'I'm a preacher. But if it'll work in surgery, it'll work in the sanctuary.'*

So, as I'm preaching this sermon and I notice some of you nodding off to sleep, it won't bother me, because I know that several days later you may get a little Christian twitch. You won't know what caused it, but I'll know!

I've always enjoyed crafting sermon titles that are somewhat ambiguous. As indeed, this one is --'Locating the Church'. Some of you may be thinking that this title suggests the preacher may be taking this opportunity to pronounce boldly where he thinks our joint worship services should be centered—SSUC or Chalmers? Well, I may appear foolish at times, but I'm not that foolish!

Others of you may be wondering if this title will indicate the importance of what is called in the trade, 'Church tramping'. ie. the practice of newcomers testing out congregations before they decide to settle on one.

It happens all the time, newcomers, involved in such a quest, usually introduce themselves and the greeter or the minister expresses to them the hope that they will return. But often the response is - *"Well, right now we're just shopping around for the church that meets our needs."* The result: some end up returning and some do not.

No...that's not what this sermon is exploring. Instead, the question this sermon ponders is not *'how to find a particular church?'*...but rather the importance of finding *the* church.

If we are involved in a congregation, we can truly say that we have found *a* church. But that still begs the question, *'have we found the church?'* Even the word 'Church' itself is problematic, as are so many words in religious terminology. We bring with us so many different meanings and different experiences of church ...and indeed, of what we mean by Church.

Our relationship with Church can be quite difficult. Recently, I was forwarded a video of Dr. Brene Brown, a social worker and an episcopal or Anglican minister. The video was of her preaching during a service at the National Cathedral in Washington DC where the congregation consisted of a large gathering of Social Workers who were attending a Conference on Social Work and Spirituality.

Near the beginning of her sermon Dr. Brown indicated that she has had a troubled and rocky relationship with the church.

In her sermon she then went on to imagine herself as a couple-- herself and Church. She says, and I quote:
"I think if you were a couple and hung out with us, you'd probably say—'Look, either be together, or break up, whatever...just choose. Stay or go! You're (driving) us crazy- it's not good for the kids, pick one!"

She continues, *'Maybe I need to go to couples therapy with Church, that's what we as social workers (advise)...right? And I think if I went to couples therapy, Church and me, and I'm asked by the therapist, 'Well, what's wrong between the two of you?' I think I would say, 'Well, Church drives me crazy. I just can't do this anymore...I'm done'.*

How does that jingle go?

'To live above with saints I love that will indeed be glory.

To live below with those I know, ah...that's a different story'.

Some years ago, psychiatrist M. Scott Peck, author of the best-selling book *"The Road Less Travelled"*, identified 4 of what he called 'stages'. He observed these 4 stages in the lives of people in their quest for meaning on the human journey.

He describes **stage 1** as that stage in which everything is chaotic. When we are in this stage we are pretty much self-centred and may even at times be anti-social. On the whole, this is a stage in which we basically centre on our own needs.

Then, dramatically, we may move into **stage 2**. Peck describes this stage as 'getting religion'. The religion to which we are drawn or converted to is often quite rigid, which is not too surprising. For that is exactly what we are looking for—order and a God who is a kind of benevolent 'cop-in-the-sky'. But it is not so much the 'essence' as the 'form' of religion that has saved us from chaos. Such a religion or belief system, becomes the kind of structure in which we feel we are best able to cope. If we are in this stage, we don't take lightly people who seem to be fooling around with the rules. A lot of Christians who call themselves fundamentalists remain firmly planted in this stage.

But, in the next stage, **stage 3**, there is the recognition of the importance of doubt. We may even lift up scepticism as something to be affirmed. This is the stage in which we sense that for an authentic 'Yes' to take place there has to be room for a 'No' to be possible. ie. you must be able to freely *embrace* a conviction, not simply *capitulate* to it. Those of us in stage 3 often perceive the church as having all the answers ...only because it is denying all the questions. When we are in stage 3 we may find it difficult, if not impossible, to find or align ourselves with any particular church.

But spiritually, Peck insists, those who find themselves fitting this description may be on a deeper spiritual quest than those who are content to remain fixed in the other stages. Those in this stage would appreciate Meister Eckhardt's inspired comment-*'Console thyself. Thou wouldst not seek me if thou hadst not found me.'*

In this regard, I can appreciate sociologist Peter Berger's discovery that he *"could communicate much better with people who disagreed with him but who were uncertain about their position than with people who agreed with him but who held their shared views in a posture of certainty."*

Peck comments that a lot of academics are in stage 3, and although not necessarily antisocial, many are quite individualistic. But then some of us in stage 3 begin to get restless. We sense there must be something more.

We don't want to sacrifice intellect, but we do want to oppose some of its presumptions:

... we want to feel, as well as think; ...we want to intuit as well as reason; ...we want to imagine, not just know;

...we want to laugh more, cry more, and dare to dream.

Such a state allows us to be ready for what Peck calls **stage 4**. This is the stage when we sense an openness to the awesomeness of the God. This view comes to sense that it is God who mysteriously infuses life with purpose, beauty, and hope. Such an openness usually is accompanied by a deeply *communal* view of this divided but no longer divisible world. This kind of consciousness entails a profound sense of human freedom, as well as a deep awareness of personal responsibility.

When you ponder these 4 stages it is perhaps most true to say that many, if not most of us move back and forth between these stages.

To locate the church then is to locate its centre. Of course, the church wants to meet peoples' needs. But that begs the deeper question: Does the church's meeting of specific needs serve a larger goal or purpose even more important than people's individual needs, as we define those needs for ourselves?

What if the church serves people, not as a market transaction, but because it believes itself to be a people with a message that is life-giving?

Thus, there is a very real sense in which a church, any church, is being formed, or malformed, by its praise. So, we do well in choosing hymns, for example, not just to ask, "*Does the congregation like this one?*" or "*Is this hymn set to really good music?*" Rather, the deeper question is a theological one, namely—

"Who is the God, or what is the nature of the God who is being praised by this hymn?"
... and "*What sort of followers are being formed by singing this?*"

And what about the sermon? What if I'm preaching this sermon, not because I think it's uppermost on your list of weekly wants, ...but rather because I believe there is a living word that struggles to be heard by you and by me. For gathered here in this place, you and I are identifying ourselves with a long, long line of people who have come to recognize that in the proclamation of the Word, such words '*between us*' can become a Word '*beyond us*'

This 'Word beyond us' may be the sudden awareness of coming up against a particular claim upon our lives. We may not name it anything more than 'an awareness'.

This is so since the difficulty in using religious words is that their aim is to describe realities which cannot be fully captured by words. That's the difficulty in even using the word 'God'. The German Lutheran theologian Rudolf Otto was aware of this when he referred to God as, '*the feeling which remains where the concept fails*'. What a challenge it is to discover religious words that open the way to a broader and deeper vision of the reality we are trying to describe and engage.

In the passage from 1 Corinthians, that Norm read, we as preachers should heed Paul's warning: '*Unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.*' To be heard and understood in a world that has stopped listening is quite a challenge.

What is the solution to the problem with sermons? Answer - better sermons!

So, what needs to be asserted is recognizing that what we get out of what is done here, should not be as great a concern among us, as fidelity i.e. remaining loyal, to the peculiar nature of the God we worship. That's why it is so central in worship to encounter a sense of mystery and awe, as well as reverence and silence.

Ways of giving fresh meaning and broader interpretations to our traditional ways of proclaiming the Christian faith, needs to find a secure and lasting dwelling place in the Church. In that sense, to locate the church, is to realize that the church is not only about *meeting* my needs, it is also about *rearranging* my needs.

The early followers of Jesus had a very instructive description of the essence of their faith. Avoiding doctrinal formulations, they referred to their faith in Jesus as "*the way*". Indeed, according to the Book of Acts, the early church was probably first known as "*the people of the way*".

i.e. To be a people who knew their security, their freedom, their identity, their wholeness, lay in following the way of Jesus, the Jesus Way.

This is the Way where the beloved are those who are merciful;
 ...who hunger and thirst for what is fair and just;
 ...who continue to strive to make peace in a world where there is little peace;
 ...who bear the consequences of speaking truth to power.

So sometimes the church is about giving me needs I would never have had, had I not located the church. We need comfort, reassurance, a sense of peace. Yes. But to locate the church is to realize that its primary metaphor is formation.

It could be that most of us, including myself, often come to church for the wrong reasons. But my experience also tells me that, in unexpected and amazing ways, these wrong reasons can be reformed. Our desires can be redirected, our preconceptions changed. In fact, when we locate the Church we may discover that what we thought were our problems can be revealed as less important when confronted with other claims upon our lives. This is true especially those that are given, although not limited, through the life and teachings of that wise wandering rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth.

Said the Japanese poet Basho -- *'Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise. Seek what they sought'*

This wise one named Jesus is also the One whom our tradition understands as coming into our world *'to satisfy our yearnings for who God is and how God is toward us'*.

To locate the Church, is to come up against something claiming us for what we alone can be;
 ...it may be a moment when we discover ourselves to be living in a state of falsehood and realize that some kind of new life of integrity beckons;
 ...it may be hearing a claim which calls us in the direction of willing someone's well-being when we were starting to move toward that person in a mode of revenge;
 ...it may be coming with a very narrow view of our understanding of what we mean by 'God,' only to come up-against the limitation of such a view and finding liberation in a more inclusive spirituality. A spirituality that recognizes that we are inextricably connected to each other by something greater than us;
 ...We may come seeking genuine community with other people only to be astounded by encountering the hospitality of God.

In Jesus day, some listeners to him, I'm sure left saying, *"I'm sorry, that new preacher just didn't do a thing for me."* But others, a few, not everyone, realized that Jesus was about something considerably larger than their initially perceived needs.

So perhaps our most appropriate prayer on this Sunday, is that each one of us will find the church. Not just *a* church but *the* church. And having found it, that we will be enabled, in the midst of diversity, to be the church. To be the church with such:

...clarity of purpose, ...creativity of conviction,breadth of compassion,and depth of humility, that others—when they come through these doors, will come to realize that they, in their turn, have found the church.

And now to the God who calls us to be Church, to this God be all honour, and praise, world without end, Amen and amen.

* * * *