

Becoming the Church

I started off last week with a quote of something I had read. Maybe it's a testament to my lack of imagination, but I'm going to do the same thing today.

When I got home from church last Sunday, I went on to Facebook and Twitter to check out what was happening in the lives of my Christian social media colleagues: often people post links to sermons, or share messages relating to what they experienced in church that morning.

I saw a Facebook post by Rob Fennell, who is a theology professor at the Atlantic School of Theology. Rob wrote:

"A lot of struggling churches ask the question: how can we get more people in our church? It's often the wrong question, or at least not the first question that should be asked.

The first questions should be, why are we here? why do we exist? what is our place within God's mission, God's purposes for the community around us? Until we're clear about that, the other questions won't be

possible to answer—and possibly won't matter at all."

This statement has been rolling around in my thoughts this past week as I have been pondering our life at Trinity, and as I have been working with our Board to prepare for a strategic planning retreat at the beginning of June. I've been pondering this as well in the light of this week's Scripture readings that Sigrid-Ann read for us this morning.

In the reading from Acts, you get this sense of a community that was very clear about its purpose. They were on fire with a sense of purpose. They were "devoted" to the apostles teaching—the teaching that for us is recorded in the Gospels—and to fellowship—the breaking of bread and the prayers. There's a sense of *intensity* to their commitment, and we're told that awe came upon them, as wonders and signs were being done amongst them.

This awesome experience made it seem natural to them to share their goods and share their lives in common: all their resources were pooled, so that everyone was provided for. They spent much time together—eating, praying,

praising God, and earning the goodwill of everyone around them.

The result of all this, we are told, is that God added to their numbers. The community grew and grew.

It sounds like a great recipe for church growth. But notice that, as Rob Fennell points out, it starts with having a sense of purpose. Growth is a consequence of people having a passionate sense of purpose, and a reason for being together.

They are not *trying* to grow; they're not *trying* to get people to come to church. They are being devoted to the apostles teaching and to fellowship; to breaking bread and praying together; to sharing resources and sharing their lives, and making sure no one in their company goes without. As a *consequence* of doing those things, they grow. They are an attractive community because of what they are doing.

As Rob Fennell points out, that's where the conversation needs to start. With those questions of: why are we here? why do we exist? what is our place within God's mission, God's purposes for the community around us?

In truth, I think we have a ways to go to answer those questions at Trinity. We have a general sense of our purpose described in our mission, vision, and values. There are a lot of good things in there, and probably

nothing with which any of us would disagree.

The next step for us is to articulate our mission, vision, and values in concrete ways, ways that enable us to say concretely and specifically what we are about and why we are here.

This is challenging for us, in part because of our long history. The roots of our Trinity congregation go back to before the official incorporation of Vernon 125 years ago, if you count our Presbyterian and Methodist forebears. For most of our history, we could define our mission as simply "being the United Church in Vernon." That was enough.

That had a certain meaning in a culture in which everyone went to church, and the church was at the centre of community life. For a long time that was an attractive mission statement; people wanted to be part of our denominational tradition.

In our heyday, we did a lot of good. We too were devoted to fellowship, and to social action; we prayed together, and supported each other through all the phases and changes of life: we baptized babies and confirmed teenagers; married young adults, and provided care for children; women's groups and men's groups and couples groups proliferated; we provided pastoral care for older adults, and services to mark the end of life, and support for those who grieved. Of course, we carry on doing many of

these things today, often on a smaller or diminished scale.

But one of the things that happened over the past century in denominational traditions like ours is that we tended to emphasize more and more aspects of fellowship and mutual support, so that they became almost ends in themselves, no longer rooted in our particular faith story.

The line between mainline church culture and mainstream middle class culture became thinner and thinner. We began to lose our distinctive identity, our Christian identity. So, for example, how does Christian fellowship differ from the fellowship found in a sorority, or in a sports team, or in a group like Rotary or Kinsmen?

Well, there's one clue in the story from Acts: we're told that the foundation of that community was the apostles' teaching, the Church's story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and what that story tells us about what God is up to in the world. Our Easter story is that because God raised Jesus from the dead, we know that nothing is impossible with God. That's the source of the signs and wonders in the Acts story.

It's also the inspiration for the radical economic sharing in that story: now that God has raised Jesus from the dead, it's a sign that we are living in a whole new world, with entirely new social patterns. So instead of the church looking like the world around it, it

looks strange and new; and all kinds of things are happening there that we couldn't imagine happening outside it.

We live in a time when people are turning away from political parties and movements and organizations that have been dominant for the past half-century. If there's one thing that the recent election in the United States, and the current election in France, and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom tell us, it's that the political and social consensus of the past half-century has broken down, it's run aground.

At the same time of course, our form of church is running aground as well. What if the answer to the church's malaise, and to our social and political malaise is the same? What if the answer lies in us returning to our story, that core story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?

If we're trying for institutional survival, we probably face the same odds as many of the political parties and social institutions in the Western world that are on the ropes. If on the other hand, we recover our distinctive story—and let that story shape our lives, and our identities, and yes even our politics—then maybe we have something powerful to share with a world hungering for a better story than the ones currently on offer.

In the words of Will Willimon, "Christians are people who think that of all the possible ways that one might get to God, the best way, the surest

way, is Jesus. In this Jew from Nazareth who lived briefly, died violently, and rose unexpectedly, we have the most reliable way to God.”

This story, even in its simplest contours, says so much. It tells us about God’s attention to the littlest ones, the sheep who are vulnerable to the predations of thieves and bandits; and we might think of those in the U.S. who are now at risk of losing their health care: those who are without employment, those who are poor, women, people of colour.

Our story of Jesus’ violent death on a cross tells us about God’s solidarity with those who suffer violence, and we might think of the people of Syria, and other places where violence and conflict rages; we might call to mind, too, those on the margins of Canadian society, including First Nations people who endure such high rates of poverty and violence.

Our story says that God’s resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the ultimate sign of God’s justice. God will set all things right in the end, and has begun doing so in the resurrection of Jesus. This sign of God’s justice is a direction to us to align our lives with God’s justice, to take a good look at the ways we are contributing to inequality, injustice, racism, sexism, or any behaviour that fails to recognize the image of God in others.

It’s a direction to us to set to work dismantling the walls and barriers that we have erected, and to

begin the work of radical sharing of life and resources that we heard about in the reading from Acts this morning.

This story is incredibly powerful. It provides an answer, or at least a framework for answering the questions that our friends and neighbours here, and around the world are asking. If we would live this story, I have no doubt about what a powerfully attractive community this would be.

Now—will it bring people into church and restore our fortunes, and change our trajectory from decline to growth?

There’s no guarantee of that, of course. But it seems to me that the ways we have been doing things for the past half-century or so have mostly run their course. I think it’s time for us to try something new.

And when I say something new, of course, I really mean something very, very old. I think it’s time for us to go deeper into our own story, to seek direction from that story, to seek our purpose there. In that distinctive story, the story that is different from the ways of the world that have become our ways.

Our Christian story is God’s Good News to a weary world. That’s what the church is invited to be a part of. Two thousand years ago a tiny, bedraggled and demoralized band of Jesus-followers took that story to heart and changed the world. Today, by the

unending grace of God, we are asked to do the same. Amen.

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