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## A Patchwork Church

Here's a story from a friend who once lived in a very small town. And in this very small town was a church, which my friend did not attend. What she noticed is that this church was attended by a most unlikely group of people: not the leading lights of the town, not the saints; but those folks that Scripture and tradition labels sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes.

My friend marvelled at how this assortment of folks could attend church so faithfully, and yet live their lives so fecklessly: in church on Sunday morning, and in all kinds of trouble by Sunday afternoon. Hypocrites, she muttered, each time she passed that church.

One day she spoke to a wise elder in her life about these hypocritical church goers. The wise woman responded, Did it ever occur to you that these are the folks who really need to go to church?

Our Scripture readings from way back in the first century, the first generations of the church, remind us that this is not a new story; that as it was in the beginning, it is now, and probably forever will be in the church. My friend and mentor Will Willimon says succinctly, the church is a mess!

The church is a mess. Our Scripture readings for today include another

passage from Paul's letter to a divided church in Philippi, and another parable of Jesus that paints a provocative picture of who's in and who's out of the community.

Jesus' parable is part of a series of parables in which he challenges the presumption of those who saw themselves as the best and the brightest—the good people—those who imagined that they had a guaranteed place in the kingdom, that they were assured of God's favour. Not so fast, says Jesus, looks to me like some of these sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes are getting in ahead of you.

At the same time, Jesus challenges the newcomers not to be arrogant because of their new status.

Church is a mess. And the primary reason church is a mess is... because you and I are in it. This oddly designed patchwork quilt of saints and sinners, do-gooders and ne'er-do-wells, the rigorously religious and the seriously spiritual, New Agers and traditionalists, agnostics and evangelicals. And all the rest.

Church is a mess because we come from different families and different cultures; most of us have experienced different churches. We have different preferences about music and prayers and

language. We have different beliefs. We have different senses of what the church should focus on: worship and sacraments; spiritual nurture; pastoral care; community outreach.

Church is a holy mess. And it always has been.

And, as I said, the reason church is a mess is because me and you are in it. Because we are in it together.

Much of the time we get into trouble because we have a plan for the church, and other people seem to get in the way of our plans. I think this is true of pastors as well as of lay people.

We have a vision for what the church is supposed to be, and we are raring to go, off in pursuit of that vision—and we find it most inconvenient that many of the other people in the church seem to get in the way of that. The nineteenth-century poet Shelley is reported to have said, “I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him that leprous bride of his, the church.”

The messy church. Some of us would prefer to love Jesus without loving those whom Jesus has gathered round him, in all their diversity; those with whom we are comfortable, along with those with whom we are decidedly uncomfortable.

For some of us this takes other forms. It's not so much about loving Jesus as it is about being passionately committed to our vision of what the church ought to be. To go back to my earlier list of what the church should focus on: for some of us what's most important is worship, to touch the face of God in the sacraments, to experience

God's presence. For others, church is about hearing the voice of Jesus speak directly into their hearts, pronouncing blessing and grace, or announcing a call, commandeering their lives to some higher purpose.

For others in our church, the focus ought to be on spiritual nurture, the inner life. For others still, the church ought to focus on pastoral care, tending to the needs of our family members. And others are more energized and inspired by focussing outwards, wanting to meet some need in our community outside these walls. What a holy mess we are!

Now, each of these can be a compelling vision for a church. Each of them is an expression of some aspect of our Christian calling. But each of these can also be a stumbling block, an impediment to our being the church. They become an impediment to our being the church when we are more committed to *our* plan or vision for the church than we are to *God's* plan or vision for the church.

God in Jesus has indeed given the church all of these various callings. But as Paul reminds the church so many times in so many of his letters, the primary calling Jesus gives us is to love one another. And to be more committed to loving one another than we are to our particular agendas or visions for the church. Loving each other is the agenda.

Another way of saying that is to say that we *can't* love Jesus without loving those whom Jesus has gathered round him, in all their diversity; those with whom we are comfortable, along with those with whom we are decidedly uncomfortable.

Equally, God cares less about our passionate commitments to any of these callings—worship, spiritual nurture, pastoral care, or outreach—than he cares about our passionate commitment to love one another in community, to be of one mind in Christ.

So we may want a church of saints, but God gave us *us*. We may want a church of Gospel-fired Jesus-lovers, but God gave us *us*. We may want a church of spiritual seekers, but God gave us this particular mix of the rowdy and the still and the mildly curious. We may want a church that is a safe harbour from the world, or conversely one that is always out on the front lines. And again, God gave us *us*, this mixture of caregivers and protesters. We must presume that God intended it to be so, despite our better judgement about what the church ought to look like.

The patchwork quilt that is our congregation, that is Trinity United Church, may look messy, unseemly, disorganized. Those of us with various plans or visions for the church may be tempted to clean it up, to make it more organized, to give it more uniformity. To make it more one way or the other; to make it just so. To make it more comfortable for one or another group.

But I suspect that that is not God's intention for us. Maybe the problem isn't the nature of our quilt, with all its peculiarities and irregularities; maybe the problem is in how we see it, that we're not yet seeing this quilt the way God does. Our challenge then is to loosen our grip on our particular agendas or visions, no matter how holy or inspired they seem, and to tune in and attend to God's vision for our particular part of Christ's church.

God gave us *us*, and God gave us Jesus, and Scripture, and the sacraments and said, now be the church. To go back to the story I opened with—about the little church in the little town—for whatever reason, we are the ones Jesus has chosen to gather round him in this place; maybe we are the ones who most need to be here.

Yesterday, we had the third session of the Cultural Competency Course with Okanagan elders Chris Marchand and Eric Mitchell. Eric pointed out that, traditionally, the Okanagan people didn't need a church, they didn't need to come to a building to worship. They had a teaching, a way of life that governed all their relationships—with the creator, with each other, with the animals, and with the earth. Everything was an integrated whole.

We don't have that in the culture in which we live, a shared communal sense of how we are meant to live with God the creator, with each other, and with the creation. And all of it undergirded by a rich set of traditions, and a story that makes sense of the universe and our place in it.

We don't have that in our wider culture, so that's why we do have the church, that's why we need it. It's for those of us who need help, who need opportunities to practice, who need support in working out how to live in right relationship with God, with one another, and with the earth. The church provides us with a set of traditions, and a story that helps us do that.

At the heart of the church is the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our story says that God loved

us so much that God took on flesh and came to live with us, to teach us God's ways. God in Jesus took on the full vulnerability of human life to show us how we might live as children of God even amidst our human frailty. On the cross, Jesus took on the full weight of all that is wrong with the world, in order to free us from evil's grip.

On Easter morning, God raised Jesus from the dead as a sign of God's total victory over sin and death, and defeat of all the forces that would thwart human life and the earth's flourishing. The church teaches that God's resurrection of Jesus is a new creation, a whole new beginning, for the world. We come to church to work out, to practice, the implications of this story, to practice with one another.

That is why we are here, participating in this holy mess that is the church. That is why we gather with those who are different from us, and pray and sing songs together, and sit through committee meetings together, and serve the needs of the church family or the world together, and why we put up with each other, and struggle to love one another.

We are drawn here by Jesus, and by this strange old story that promises to reveal to us the truth about our world and about who we are and about how we are to live. We come as patches of the quilt, willing to be formed into God's beautiful tapestry.

Let us pray:<sup>1</sup>

Lord, give us the eyes to see your body, your church in our fellow sisters and brothers in this congregation. Give us patience with the faults and foibles of our

fellow members in Christ's body, and give them the grace to be patient with us, as well. Give us faith in our ability, with your grace, to be the church that you would have us to be, to be courageous and creative in our witness, to be bold in our proclamation of the gospel, and to be persevering as we confront whatever challenges are placed before the church in our time and place.

You have called us to be your visible presence in this world. Now we pray that you would give us what we as a church need to be faithful to your vocation. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource.