

May 28, 2017

The One Thing We Can Do
Luke 24:44-53; Psalm 93; Acts 1:6-14
Ascension Sunday

Rev. Charles Fensham

Every February second year Knox College students travel to Cuba to learn about the church and its mission in another cultural and situation. The Presbyterian Church in Cuba has faced tremendous challenges over the last 70 years. Between 1953 and 58 Cuba went through a time of revolution and extreme turbulence. Pre-revolutionary Cuba was a place where an extremely wealthy few lived royally while most people lived in abject poverty with almost no education. This situation was made possible by a brutal dictatorship. In the midst of these circumstances the Presbyterians tried to keep their heads down and follow the Lord. When the revolution came and developed in the direction of ideological atheism many Presbyterians who had means and most of the pastors left the country. At the time a young Cuban pastor, Rev. Sergio Arce was studying at Princeton Seminary in the United States. One day he received a call from Cuba. On the line was no one other than Che Guevara himself. He asked Sergio to return to Cuba and to lead the Presbyterian Church which was now bereft of pastors. It turns out Che fell in love with a young Presbyterian woman who was baptised by Rev. Arce. She insisted that she would only marry Che if he would agree to a Presbyterian Church wedding. And, so it was that Sergio and his wife returned to Cuba to officiate at Che's wedding. Upon their arrival they heard of the great effort to bring literacy to the poorest of poor in the mountain regions of Cuba. Sergio and his wife Dora travelled with revolutionary teams into the mountains and participated in a massive effort of public education that led to the amazing transformation of the Cuban people from a literacy rate of 60% in 1959 to 96% by the end of 1961. However, the Presbyterian Church in Cuba did not fare so well. Churches literally emptied out. Between people moving to the US and other places in Latin America and the new sense that being a Christian was neither a good thing or a smart thing to do the atheist state, churches emptied out until there were only a few hard-nosed faithful Christians left. They literally dwindled to two or three gathered in the local churches. Sergio, and the few remaining pastors set out to care for those who were left and to find new direction and meaning for a decimated church which was a shadow of its former self. A few years ago, just before his death, a group of students and I had the pleasure of sitting down with Sergio, then in his 90's, to hear about his experience and the amazing story of the work of the Holy Spirit in Cuba in the years that ensued. Churches are again thriving in Cuba. Their problems are problems of resources, not because of shrinking numbers, but rather, because the needs are so great and so many are turning to Christ for hope.

OUR SITUATION IN PCC

Perhaps we can relate as members of the PCC? We too have been caught in an unexpected and perhaps unwelcome wave of social change and our own denomination is closing churches and desperately working at finding the magic formula to revive our communities. What I have learned from the Cubans is sobering. There is no magic formula. There is no magic new worship song or shiny bible program that will revive our churches. There is no human agent that will save the church. As nice as praise teams and Power Point slides might be, they are not the cure-all for our problems.

Sure, there are churches that grow in numbers in Canada and some of them do have shiny programs and all kinds of gimmicks. But, the most knowledgeable sociologist of religion have found that they are not really attracting many new people who did not identify as Christian before, but rather they attract Christians from other churches. It is, as some humorously put it: "a recycling of the saints."

HERE IS THE THING!

We need to trust that the church is in the hands of God.

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Our task is not one of gimmicks and tricks but to be faithful.

We are not unique in our struggle for church survival in Canada today. Christians throughout history have faced similar challenges. There are many, many times in history that churches emptied, dwindled and closed down. There are cities in the Middle East where thriving early Christian churches lived during the first five centuries where there are no visible Christian communities left today.

JESUS AND DISAPPOINTING NUMBERS

Even Jesus faced such discouraging realities. According to the Gospel of John, at one point in his preaching the whole crowd left him so that only the disciples were left. In a tone that *sounds just a bit disappointed* Jesus says to his disciples, "And you---would you also like to leave?" (John 6:67)

During the Medieval period Christian devotion in many communities dwindled to a few monks in small monasteries doing daily devotions. With the Viking invasions in the British Isles many a Christian community was destroyed, killed off and raised to the ground. Yet then, two or three monks or a few nuns would arrive and would start to repair, placing stone upon stone, replanting gardens and slowly, person by person, stone by stone, prayer by prayer a new community would arise. Eventually those same Viking invaders also embraced Christian faith...

The church is not in our hands - the church is in God's hands.

God does not call on us to find a magic bullet; God calls us to be faithful.

This is the secret of faith, when things seem at their most dire, then there the small flame of hope rekindle and starts a new fire. That fire is not in our hands; our task is to be faithful, and to be faithful, according to the prophet Micah, is to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God....

CAN YOU DO THAT?

Can you do justice, love mercy, and simply walk humbly with God?

Every year during lent we Christians are invited to remember the truth that Christian faith is not built on easy and quick solutions. The passion of Christ did not seem a great triumphant success – yet Jesus walked on faithfully.

- There was nothing good to be discerned in Jesus' journey to the cross.
- There was nothing good to be seen along his stumbling way to the hill where he would be crucified.

- There were no handles on the cross he was carrying; neither were gloves supplied to keep the splinters out of his skin.
- There was no good to be seen in the agony, the pain and the despairing cry, “My God why have you forsaken me!”

The story just did not go to an easy happy ending...

The disciples were scared out of their minds. Everything seemed to have failed. All the promise and hope seemed gone.

OUR LESSON FROM LUKE

According to Luke’s version of the story, when the disciples were fearful and uncertain, Jesus suddenly appeared among the disciples – greeting them. He does not urge them to look at the bright side, he promises them peace in the midst of pain.

“Peace be with you,” he says.

Luke’s story has this dreamlike quality recalling dreamlike emotions like puzzlement and fear. It has that sense that dreamlike vision gives that things are both unclear but yet profoundly true. In our lesson from Luke 24 it tells us that Jesus opened their minds so that they understood the Scriptures.

In our world we can so easily reduce these words to intellectual comprehension, but that is not what the original text implies. It implies a kind of inner transformation that affects our wills and reshape our insight and behaviour.

This resurrected and transcendent Jesus does not give them a quick fix. He does not tell them to launch a new program. He does not advise more accessible scrolls in the pew. In fact, he does not tell them to do particular marvelous things.

What does he tell them?

He makes a promise and then he tells them to wait.

In this subtle paradox of doing by not doing, of being faithful by not rushing, of living in hope without seeing immediate results we see the core of gospel challenge for our time.

In patiently waiting we are to be those who do justice, who are lovers of mercy, and are walking humbly, thankfully, praise-fully with God...

- Faithfulness means not doing some impressive things but rather being just.
- Faithfulness means not rushing but being merciful.
- Faithfulness means not seeing results yet walking in praise and thankful humility with God.
- Faithfulness means not grasping but trusting.

Yet

At the same time faithfulness does not mean apathy; that would be committing the sin of sloth.

Faithfulness does not mean laisses faire; that would mean denying justice.

Faithfulness does not mean action is not required; it is the right action, the faithful waiting full of praise and humility before God.

Note carefully that the disciples do actually do something.

Here is what our lesson tells us,

“...and (they) went back into Jerusalem, filled with great joy, and spent all their time in the Temple giving thanks to God.” (Lk 24:52-53)

Note also that Jesus does not give them a commission or “marching orders.” He gives them a promise.

“You are my witnesses of these things.”

In the parallel text in Acts 1:8 Luke reiterates that promise this way,

“But when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Here’s the thing.

We do have our job and it is being just, merciful, humbly worshipping God.

So people of St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Calgary,

We are not big, we are not impressive, we are no mega Christian phenomenon.

Yet,

We are called to be faithful.

Go – do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.