

the Rev. Karen Millard
Squamish United Church

May 16th, 2010

Readings - Easter 7

Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20-26

What's the Matter with the Church Today?

Why is it that people don't attend?

What's the matter them?

What's the matter with us?

Those are the questions I find myself wrestling with the most in my job these days. Those are the questions I hear the most from you. Those are the questions I hear the most from my colleagues and their church members.

It's hard for us as people to not take it personally when the pews are not overflowing. It's hard not to wonder what's wrong with us. And so we wonder...Perhaps we don't have the right minister. Perhaps we don't have the right programs. Perhaps we need a new building. Perhaps the seniors are too tired and the young people need to step up to the plate. Perhaps....we wonder. A small group of us went to the 'Stepping further Out' conference at Highlands United yesterday and those folks will also tell you we are not the only ones pondering.

I think it is important for us to know we are not alone in asking these questions? And that is why on top of the Stepping Further Out conference this week I also heard two lectures by Barbara Brown Taylor who was addressing just this sort of thing. The first was "What's the Matter with Preaching today?" and the second was "Biblical Narrative in the Age of Twitter." I was sorry I couldn't make it to more of her talks but just like most of us I didn't have the time or money so at least I snuck into the free events (and even those were in question because I really didn't have the time).

But I'm glad I went even if it was only to hear the very first thing Barbara began with. And that thing was a reality check.

This is not the first time the above questions have been asked. And it will not be the last. Culture is a powerful force. Just ask Paul and Silas who are jailed for teaching and preaching and healing in the wrong time and place with the wrong method. They were arrested because they were Jews who were not following the culture of the day.

And although Christians, preachers, prophets and theologians at least in North America are not concerned about being arrested for their teachings. We find ourselves caught between a church culture that wants us to stay the same and a dominant culture that wants us to do things very differently. We find ourselves looking at the early church and understanding their wrestle with

traditions, laws and teachings. We lament with them as we struggle to be heard and understood and relevant.

And so the questions we ask are not fresh and new. They are a part of the struggle of life and faith and culture. "What's the matter with Preaching Today?" was not an original title or topic. Taylor stole this title and subject matter from Henry Emmerson Fosdick who asked that question in an article in Harper's magazine seventy-five years ago. When Fosdick asked that question he was not famous. It's hard to believe that he even wrote in Harper's magazine at all let alone with such a subject matter. But many believe that it was from this article and his continued interaction with the cultural needs of the day that Fosdick soon had people standing in line to hear him preach.

You know as well as I do that there are not a lot of places in Canada today where you will find people standing in line to hear a preacher. You know as well as I do that for some reason most people don't feel the need to attend church today, and if they know the need they find it hard to squeeze it into their insanely busy schedules. You know as well as I do that the majority of people today find themselves exhausted and so the idea of going into a place to receive yet another lecture, or be given more work to do simply stops them from walking through our door on a Sunday morning. I don't imagine you will be shocked to hear that even some of my most spiritual friends and relatives rarely attend a church because they don't consider themselves to be religious people.

I have to note because it seems to be true that the more fundamentalist churches seem to be growing and although I don't completely understand it I believe it has something to do with people appreciating a place that gives them black and white answers in the confusing world we live in today. We have so many mediums bombarding us - telling us what will be good for us and what won't. They contradict each other and it is hard to know what is right.

In one day I could have someone tell me I should have a soy shake for breakfast to loose weight, and someone else tell me soy is poison. In one conversation I could have someone tell me you should get a flu shot to be safe while another tell me it's just a money grab. In two minutes I could see a commercial for a Mazda and another one for Kia and I would have to figure out for myself which one really would make my life complete.

I admit some evenings you might find me sitting on the couch at home, checking my email, logging into Facebook, all the while reading a book and watching American Idol on T.V. I am not saying this is good. I am just saying it is.

And along with that we find ourselves living in a culture where not everyone is convinced the church is relevant. And I will dare to say that what we do and how we are is not always relevant. I say that as someone who loves the church so much that I spent more money than I had to be educated to work within it. I say that as someone who believes within the core of my being that God and faith are relevant. I say that with a deep desire to see this church community alive and

flourishing. I say that not that we might be discouraged but that we might live into the truth of our faith in this day. Not up and against the others in our culture but walking alongside them just as Jesus would have. Looking to their very needs and concerns and realities.

Perhaps with the Phillipian jailer we find ourselves asking in this day “What must *we* do to be saved?” What must *we* do to keep from losing our life, our faith, our vision, our church?

Paul and Silas and Jesus respond. Believe and you will be saved.

Believe what? Saved from what? Saved from so much more than a suffering afterlife. Saved from a life of despair, loneliness, division, oppression. Saved into a spirit of life and unity as we are drawn into God. Believing that God is with us. Saved into a new paradigm, a new way of living in and seeing the world.

That is what Jesus prays for, for us in the gospel reading of today. (I’m going to read this passage for us again from the Message). Jesus says “I’m praying not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me because of them and their witness about me. *Jesus goes on to say* The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind - just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they might be one heart and mind with us...so they’ll be unified and together as we are - I in them and you in me. Then they’ll be mature in this oneness, and give the godless world evidence that you’ve sent me and loved them in the same way you’ve loved me...righteous *one*, the world has never known you, but I have know you and these disciples know that you sent me on this mission. I have made your very being known to them - who you are and what you do and continue to make it known so that your love for them might be in them exactly as I am in them.”

Jesus is praying for us in this passage. He’s praying that we might be drawn into God in such a way that we will find unity with one another. Not just within the church but with those outside of the church. God’s desire for us is that we might be pulled into relationship with the holy and with one another. When we are drawn completely into that relationship and spirit we will become about God’s mission not our own desires but God’s.

As much as I would like to end this sermon with the exact method for growth in the church today I cannot do that. (Although I look forward to embracing some of the tools and ideas we were given yesterday). But most faithfully what I can do is wrestle in faith alongside you as saints and sinners have been doing since the time of creation. What I can do is remind you that we are not called to numbers we are called to life and love. That needs to be our priority. What I do know is that we have the spirit of the holy who is praying for us, creating with us, and breathing life into us even today. God is alive even in the spiritual non-religious culture of “Cascadia” in which we live.

I believe that it is within God that we are allowed to wrestle and discover new life and new ways of being.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminded us “We are being spoken into this world as the living word.”
We today are the logos - the word of God being spoken.

Are we the story people want to read? Are we the ones who people can't help but pick up because they want to know more? Are we the ones that people are drawn into because of our spirit of life? Are we the ones welcoming all people from every walk of life to come and be with us? Do we believe that we have something great here in this community of faith. Do we have good news that we can't help but share and invite others into?

John 13:34,35 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all ... will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

My desire for us as God's mission bearers is that we might look through a lens of discovery. That our gaze might fall on the place the spirit is calling us to. Or that at least we might close our eyes and breath in the deep life breath of the holy so that we live into the life we are called to. That we might journey with Moses and know that we too are blessed to be a blessing.

What must we do to be saved?
Believe that we already are.

And then pray in love and hope and faith.
Yesterday Mardi Tindal shared this very honest commission with us and I invite you to pray into this mission with me now.

Hope

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of hope - not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; not the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything Is Gonna Be All r=Right.” But a different, sometimes lonely place, of truth-telling about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we're seeing, asking them what they see.

- Victoria Safford

I invite you to stand as you are able as we sing the sung creed together