

Friendship United Church, Demorestville, ON
Mark 9: 38-50
Sept. 27, 2009
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This past Monday I was part of a visioning group with the Quinte Health Centre's. The point of the group was to look at Spiritual Care in our Hospital system in today's reality and how to make spiritual care part of the health model and team. It was identified that we are past the days when all people were attached to a specific church, to a specific minister or even to a denomination. Some other things that were identified included lack of funding or budget cuts, the Federally mandated privacy act and even infection control regulations. As an example this flu season if clergy cannot prove that we have had our flu shot we may be denied access to people in the hospital.

Our reality within Spiritual Care today is that we have at least two generations of un-churched people who would list themselves as Christian or who are assumed to be Christian; meaning that two generations of people have little accurate knowledge of church and many have never even been in a church. For those of us who have been involved in our churches for some time this may seem as a shocking reality. So what is it about our churches that has stopped people from being involved?

Before I go on with this I do want to make it clear to you that I am speaking only from a church context however it has been noted that people in general have stopped participating in any "member" style organization not just the churches; that is Kinsmen/Kinnettes, Lions Clubs, Scouts and Guides; Masons; IODE, Eastern Star to name a few. People are not committing their time and energy into any kind of service organization.

As a church in the 21st Century we are faced with declining membership, declining funds, and declining commitment. So what is it that has created this disconnect? It is apparent that somehow, somewhere along the line we have put up barriers between ourselves and God, between ourselves and the church. It may seem to you that I am preaching to the choir so to speak, after all you are here; but it is important for us to recognise and then try to understand how we can live in this new reality because, as Mark has told us, and we read this morning, "Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward."

And then Jesus goes on to talk about barriers, stumbling blocks that we place in front of others who believe or who would believe if we did not block them. Once again the tough words of the gospel calling us to account for our behaviour. In fact Jesus gets downright nasty about what we should do to ourselves if we put up a stumbling block, a barrier to someone who believes and has come to him. Jesus uses the examples of hands, feet, and eyes to make his point. Cut them off, tear them out rather than using them to block another; hang a stone around your neck and be thrown into the sea. Harsh punishment don't you think?

We should be thankful that we do not take our Bible literally because most, and I would even suggest all of us would be missing some parts. We have all created barriers at some point or another with something we have said or done that turned someone away from our church. I am not suggesting that this is the only thing that has stopped people from coming to us; there is of course many factors. We are a much more active society than two generations ago.

We have organized sports that have replaced Sunday School for our children and the adults that have to drive them. We have work schedules that involve 24/7 workers, factories, stores open all hours, services available 24 hours etc. We have created a culture on the move. We rarely take the time to sit in the quiet of God. The “be still and know that I am God” time. Two generations ago, households only required one partner to work outside the home, today’s families cannot afford this if they want to keep up the lifestyle to which they have become accustomed. We have created a standard that must be kept or we will be seen as unsuccessful. We are driven by our consumerism and we are exhausted by our own creation. The appliances that were suppose to simplify our lives and give us more time to relax have taken over our “quiet time”. We are so busy working to afford the time savers that we have no time to use them.

Computer’s that were suppose to take the place of paper have created more paper than ever and twice the work as we save to disk or memory stick and make a hard copy just in case.

Our churches are caught up in the mix with no specific day of rest, the church scrambles to come up with new ways to serve the communities. Mid week evening services that people are too tired after work to attend. Sunday services that take away from some folks “only day off”. The church has become the inconvenience, the place we feel obligated to go to as opposed to the community to find fellowship; the place to renew and refresh; to learn and to grow. We no longer want to give up our “free time” to the church. When you look at it this way, it’s not really our fault after all. It isn’t us that puts up the barriers, it is our society.

And yet here we are, faced again by our gospel asking us to be accountable for our words and actions. Calling us to account for our part in the breakdown. We are the ones who are here and so we ask the question, Are you for us or against us? What are our particular barriers?

I spoke recently to a woman who used to attend a local church. She told me she stopped going to church because her children were forced to go to Sunday school even if they would have rather stayed in church and she felt she was glared at when she was there. I can certainly remember the days of you better sit quietly and behave or else. I can remember one kid in our Junior Choir being hit over the head with a hymn book because he was not sitting quietly in church. I’m sure many of you could tell stories of how church was wearing your Sunday best complete with hats and gloves for woman

and ties and jackets for men. Some would say these became barriers as our society changed its ideas about formality.

My mother can remember when she was young that it was a well known fact that all the rich people went to the Anglican Church and yet the Pentecostal kids thought the rich people went to the United Church; and then there was the Catholics who did everything differently because they were all foreigners.

Barriers; judgements; assumptions; misinformation. It is said that a person decides if they like a church within the first seven seconds of their arrival in the door. Even before the service begins they have a sense of whether or not this is the place for them; which means that what they see in our sanctuaries when they enter, how they are greeted as they enter, and the overall “feel” of the place is key. I suggest that it begins even before that. What kind of image are we projecting to our communities? Do we invite people to join us? Do we talk up our event and services? Do we participate in our social times? Do we keep things clean and fresh?

So often we want to hang on to old buildings and old furniture and old pictures but unfortunately this can become a barrier. Churches that have re-created themselves tend to have more success in keeping “visitors” coming back. A number of churches who have amalgamated and closed their individual doors to open new doors in new locations invite newcomers and old-timers to come and see what is offered. But once inside the message has to be clear as well. We are not the old stuffy churches we remember from years ago. God is not stuck in the 1920's, 50's or even the 70's. God did not stop talking to people after the Bible was put together, to be followed without question or interpretation. God has created and is creating. God is looking for new ways through new people and new ideas to re-create the relationship God so desperately wants with us.

No doubt many of you have heard people say I am spiritual not religious. This is what I call, the “get out of jail free” card of Christians who don't attend or connect themselves to churches. Spiritual to most indicates a certain freedom; spirit is found everywhere in everything; even outside the building and routine of church and although I agree with these kinds of statements completely and do not hold begrudge anyone their spiritual time in nature, music or other times of spirit connectedness, I am saddened by the lack of desire to be within a community with many of whom share these same feelings. Religious, on the other hand, indicates to many organised, bossy, one way is the only way, fear mongering and apocalyptic in nature, no room to question or wonder.

Those who may be stuck on the religious side need to hear the words of Jesus saying, “Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” The church goer is not the only one who can do the work of Christ. The churchgoer is not the only one who will get the reward.

I think how we present our Religious selves to a Spiritual seeking society is key to breaking down some of the barriers. What is not clear is how we do this is a way that

honours our heritage but moves us forward. This is the challenge of our gospel, may we begin to think and dream it into being. Amen.