

What Kind of House?
Isaiah 43:15-19; Acts 7:44-50
Sermon by Marilyn Rudy-Froese
April 19, 2015

This is the last sermon in our series on membership, mutual accountability and belonging. The Spiritual Leadership Team began having conversations about membership last fall, and this worship series grew out of those conversations. Since you may not remember the first 2 sermons, let me just re-cap briefly what they were about. You can go to our website, if you want to read them in full. Dan's first sermon was "Questions about Membership" in which he explored the various ways that people connect to Berkey, from non-active members to very active non-member participants. Membership is not biblically necessary, nor is it theologically necessary; it grew out of a particular culture and time and was a way to organize and keep statistics around who was connected to the congregation. It was created in a time when people were interested in stability.

Dan's second sermon, "On the Way", explored the concepts of believing, behaving and belonging. While believing used to be the most important part of joining a church, belonging has taken its place. People come to church, not so much because of the doctrines or beliefs, but because they have found a community in which to belong.

It is now my job to "wrap up" the discussion or to launch us into the future--I'm not sure which. I wish I could say that I'll give you a clear picture of what I think the church needs to be, or what it will be in the future, but in reality, I have more questions than answers. But that, too, fits with where we find ourselves, and perhaps the posture that is needed for this journey into the future. Whereas the church of the past was built on answering the questions, I believe the path forward is a journey of living the questions, or living into the questions.

I will also say this, not as a disclaimer, but so that you understand the lens through which I see and speak; up until 3 1/2 years ago, my ministry, my conversations about what it means to be Christian, Mennonite, the church, all happened in Canada. While there is a lot that is similar between our 2 countries, on some very deep levels, there are significant differences. Canadians and Americans see and experience the world very differently, and while I am learning what it means to be a Mennonite Christian in the US, I still see very much through a Canadian lens. While that doesn't make a difference in a lot of sermons, I think it does in this one.

Let's begin with secularism, which I thought might be one point in this conversation, but it is really the central theme of the conversation. And perhaps beginning with a definition is most helpful. According to the online "yourdictionary.com", secularism is: "1. worldly spirit or views; esp., a system of doctrines and practices that disregards or rejects any form of religious faith and worship; or 2. the belief that religion and ecclesiastical (or

churchly) affairs should not enter into the functions of the state, esp. into public education." Wikipedia defines secularism as the separation of church and state.

On a secularism continuum, Canada is more secular than the US, but less secular than Europe. It is ironic to say that in the US the church and state are more closely aligned, because the separation of church and state is central to what you as a country believe. But from the perspective of your neighbours to the north, there isn't much separation of church and state. A case in point: it is important to Americans that their president is a born-again Christian; it fills Canadians with fear and trembling at the thought that their prime minister is a born-again Christian.

Secularism is one of the challenges to the church, but also, I think, a gift, or at the very least, an opportunity. And maybe I can only say that because I've swum in that stream for long enough that it doesn't scare me--it is just a fact of life.

One challenge of secularism is its impact on time and priorities. The danger of secularism, of this separation of church from the rest of the world, is that it turns church and faith into a compartment in our lives, only one of the many priorities we have. Rather than being the centre of our lives, where our life of faith and church community determine the rest of our priorities, secularism skews our priorities; it lulls us into thinking we can do it all, or be part of it all; that we can fit everything in; that everything is of equal importance.

One of the realities is that the more secular the society is, the less sacred Sunday morning is. Now, this is partly due to secularism, and partly due to pluralism, but the effects on church life are similar. I'm still amazed at the fact that in this community, schools don't plan games for Wednesday evenings, so that church youth groups can meet. Sunday morning is still more universally church time than I was used to.

Congregations in Canada are used to competing with lots of other Sunday morning options. Sports teams particularly, use Sunday mornings for practices. It is not at all unusual for families to miss church most Sundays from October or November through March for hockey games and tournaments. If you're lucky, the games or practices are early Sunday morning and you can still make it to church. But regular weekend tournaments will take you away from church. This can happen for years on end, from the time kids are 9 or 10 until they are 15 or 16--when they realize they won't make it into the NHL! (This is the Canadian dream☺)

While hockey is perhaps the most consistent sport that takes people away from church on Sunday mornings, other club sports also use that time, because "there's nothing else going on".

With these kinds of demands on Sunday mornings, it's no wonder that families disconnect from church life. Dan talked about the importance of belonging in his second sermon, and if one's life outside of the church takes you away from the church for the

most significant gathering times, for months and years on end, it is hard to feel as if one belongs. It is hard to develop relationships and find a place in the community. Parents are sometimes puzzled why, after years of sports involvement, their children no longer want to come to church. But the practice of weekly worship has not been developed and nurtured, and relationships haven't been formed, so these young people have no sense of being part of a community; or not part of a faith community. Significant community happens with their team mates and significant community is formed among parents at the hockey rink--in many ways, that becomes the primary community, but it is not a faith community.

But sports aren't the only culprit in terms of how we prioritize our lives. I think with each advance in technology, people are working more and employers expect people to be available 24/7. We have lost the sacred rhythm of work and rest, and when the whole week is filled with constant activity, Sunday morning becomes an oasis of quiet, a time to catch up on sleep or housework or errands; or it becomes a time for quiet reading and drinking coffee. Because faith and church life have been relegated to a compartment of our lives, one among many things we give priority to, the rhythm of weekly worship and contributing to the life of the church no longer orients our lives and our weeks. It is no longer central, and so we have less time and energy for that. In fact, it becomes just one more obligation or demand on our time.

This has an impact on how we structure congregational life. As people's priorities change, it becomes increasingly difficult to find people to do all the committee work that needs to be done. As there are more demands on time, and life becomes increasingly full, attending one more church event, or sitting on one more committee becomes less of a priority. I think there is no question that what we do here is of great importance--small groups, Sunday School, fellowship meals, worship, MYF, peace club, mission and service projects, to name a few--all of these feed us, nurture us, bring life to our congregation and our community. **And** I think it will become increasingly difficult to sustain all of these things in the same way we have in the past. What will the structure of church life look like? I don't know, but I think it will look different.

There is no question that secularism holds great challenges for the church. However, it also presents us with some opportunity. One of the greatest opportunities is that it calls on the church to be the church, something which millenials, those born between 1980 and 2000, find important. One of the criticisms of that generation, a generation that is choosing not to be part of the church in large numbers, is that the church hasn't been the church; we haven't paid close enough attention to the poor, to racism, to injustice, to those on the fringes. We've been more concerned with doctrine and orthodoxy and boundaries--the believing aspects of faith, than with practice and hospitality and social justice--the behaving and belonging aspects of faith. We've been more concerned with judging our fellow Christians and fighting amongst ourselves, than with compassion and forgiveness.

Secularism calls on the church to be the church. It does not expect government to be the church, nor the church to govern the country. It recognizes the government's job is to make decisions that are in the best interests of all people, and the church's job is to speak into those decisions and influence government. The church's role is to influence government, speak out for justice, advocate for the voiceless; but the church is not the government.

In the 1990's, schools in Ontario stopped reciting the Lord's Prayer as part of their morning opening exercises. I went through school singing the national anthem, reciting the Lord's Prayer and hearing a scripture reading. And that was in the public school! There was quite an outcry when this practice was stopped, mostly from Christians who wanted schools to be Christian, who wanted to live in a "Christian country". The outcry was against this blatant example of secularism, but pluralism was probably also a significant reason for discontinuing the prayer. In respect of all faiths, the Christian faith would not have prominence. But as I thought about it, I realized this was absolutely the right decision. Our public schools should not be teaching our children the Lord's Prayer; that's the church's job, for it is a prayer of the church, not a civic prayer. It took us in the church a few years to realize that once the Lord's Prayer was discontinued in the schools, we had to begin to teach it, because the children weren't learning it anywhere else.

I also think that when there is a clearer separation of church and state, we have a clearer sense of who we are as a church. The danger of this is that we can develop an "over-against" attitude in which we see the other as "not us"; I'm not talking about that. But I think when we can see ourselves as the church, separate from the state, or government, then we stop expecting the government to look and act like us.

Greg Boyd, who spoke at Pastors Week at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in January, said it well. Greg is a neo-Anabaptist, meaning he discovered Anabaptism about 10 years ago, and claims Anabaptist theology and beliefs, but is not part of the historical stream of Anabaptism, nor is he Mennonite. He speaks into what it means to be Anabaptist apart from that historical stream, and the ethnic and cultural aspects of being Mennonite. One of his definitions of Anabaptism is that we are a Jesus-looking people following a Jesus-looking God. Or rather he says that we believe in a Jesus-looking God who is raising up a Jesus-looking people. That is a good definition of the church: we are a Jesus-looking people following a Jesus-looking God.

Brian McLaren says that "the church exists to form Christ-like people, people of Christ-like love." (*A New Kind of Christianity*, p. 164) I think both of these definitions of the church are helpful for us, and particularly as we think about ourselves separate from government structures. Our job is to form followers of Jesus, people who look like Jesus and love like Jesus. The future of the church isn't about perpetuating our structures; it isn't about having enough people on our worship commission or fellowship commission or stewardship commission. The future of the church is about all of us together, figuring

out what it means to follow Jesus, to be disciples of the one who freed the captives, fed the hungry, gave sight to the blind and set the oppressed free.

The future of the church is about helping to bring about the Kingdom of God. It is about being a blessing to those around us; being engaged in meaningful work and meaningful relationships. The future of the church depends on inviting others along with us as we figure out what it means to follow Jesus today, in this time and this place. Rowan Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury, says "we aren't called to study, read and discuss [new forms of Christianity] in order to save the Anglican church (we can substitute Mennonite Church) or any other institution; we are called to study [new forms of Christianity] in order that we may discern how best to serve the Kingdom of God in whatever form God is presenting it." (quoted in Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity*, p. 13)

The scriptures that were read this morning speak into the hopefulness I see for the church, even in the midst of lots of uncertainty, conflict and challenges. These passages give a picture of God at work, and invite me to trust in this God who holds the church, who has, in every generation, done something new, and who today still speaks to us--"I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel....who makes a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters.... I am about to do a new thing...I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

Or the passage from Acts, part of a long speech by Stephen, in which he outlines how the early church had been going through lots of growing pains and the previous ways of structuring their lives no longer worked. New ways needed to be found, and in the course of that work, Stephen offends the synagogue leaders and is called on to defend himself. While our passage falls in the middle of this long speech, and had a different intent for Stephen, I find it a hopeful commentary on the evolution of the church. In this re-telling, Stephen is critical of Solomon for building the temple, for Stephen says that God doesn't dwell in houses made with human hands. He quotes Isaiah 66 when he says, "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?" While God may not dwell in buildings made by human hands, at every point in history, God's people have answered the question of how to make room for God; how to create a space for God that will give shape to their faith.

In every age, God's people have been faithfully trying to find ways to be the people of God in the places where they live. In the wilderness, being the people of God looked one way--who are we when we are no longer slaves?; when they settled in the Promised Land, they had to figure out who they were in relation to other people, other religions and other gods; in erecting a permanent structure for God--how did that change who they were and how they lived faithfully? When they were in exile, what did it mean to be faithful? To sing the songs of faith in a foreign land? After Jesus had ascended to heaven, what did it mean to be faithful? Once gentiles had become followers of Jesus, what did it mean to be faithful? Was circumcision necessary? Can you eat anything with anyone? Did all the

rules from another time have to be followed by everyone? What was important and what wasn't?

In each generation, God's people have had to figure out what it means to be faithful-- what kind of house they will build for God, how they will give structure and shape to their faith. And we are no different. What does it mean to be faithful when church is no longer the centre of our lives? What does it mean to be faithful in the midst of so many other demands and priorities on our time?

How we give shape to our faith impacts how we belong to the community and how we invite people in. Membership is about where our allegiance lies; baptism is a decision to give our allegiance to Christ and to a life of faith; church is the context in which we live out that allegiance. Historically, that allegiance has been solidified in membership. What shape does that allegiance take today?

God is doing a new thing. May we have hearts and eyes to perceive it and to follow the way that God is making through the wilderness.