

Sermon August 4, 2019
at the United Church in Meadowood
Communion

Introduction

I retired 10 years ago. At retirement you are supposed to review the changes you have seen over the years and discuss possible directions for the future. I didn't do that at my retirement, largely because I did not have a hopeful vision for the future. But now after reflecting on it for ten years I think that I have something prophetic to say, something hopeful.

The Dying Church

To begin with, the changes I have seen. The United Church of Canada is a dying church. I know because I've been burying it. During my time at Dauphin I buried a hundred members and I confirmed six new members. This is a formula for disaster. A church has to keep adding new members even if they are only our children. But it has been 60 years since we even tried to develop a Sunday School curriculum that would convince our children of the truth of the Christian faith.

What do I feel as a minister in a dying church? Guilt and shame. I saw the decline in membership and it was my responsibility to do something about it. And I tried. Believe me I tried. I have a library of books on church growth, and church development, and church leadership. I have been to seminars, and workshops, and studies. I did my best. But I failed.

My approach as a minister was to preach **the love of God**. Jesus summed up the law and the prophets as love God with all your heart, and mind, and soul and strength and love your neighbour as yourself. He gave one commandment: Love one another as I have loved you. He gave one mark of the true church. By this people will know that you are my disciples, by the love you have one for another. The apostle Paul pointed out that anything you do that is not done in love, is not done in the spirit of Jesus, is not done in the Spirit of God. The apostle John said that the one

who loves knows God, for God is love.

I think we could all say amen to that.

What is wrong with this message?

Why is it so ineffectual? Why do congregations find it meaningless? Where did I go wrong?

It is actually very simple. I failed because I did not fully understand the problem. To say that God loves you is utterly meaningless if people don't believe in God. It is like saying Sherlock Holmes loves you, or Harry Potter loves you. If God is just a fiction, an imaginary figure, then the love of God is meaningless. Just a nice story. Pity it isn't true.

One thing I knew but didn't fully understand was that People stop believing in God long before they stop going to church.

My daughter had a play in the Winnipeg Fringe Festival. It was a comedy, and one of the biggest laugh was the following bit.

Sam, you go to church more than any atheist I know.

Yeah, well, I feel obligated.

What do you mean obligated?

Well, I'm the chair of the Christian education committee.

But Sam, you're an atheist.

Yeah, well, it's the United Church.

At one of my previous churches I told that joke and the chair of the Christian education committee said, "That's me."

I have a good friend, a pillar of the church, an atheist. Who says, When I go to church I'm just pretending, and sometimes I wonder if the other people in church are just pretending too.

My failure as a minister was that I never attacked atheism head on. I never said "Atheism is wrong. God is real." It was an assumption behind everything that I preached. But if you don't attack atheism head on. If you don't debunk the arguments of the atheists. If you don't present the arguments for believing in God then people think you are just pretending too.

But attacking atheism means attacking an atheist culture.
Attacking **Western culture**.

How are our children converted to atheism? They are taught in school that there is no god. As my granddaughter cheerful puts it: "I don't believe in God. I believe in Science." She loves her science teacher.

Then when they go to University they are taught that believing in God is stupid. There is one woman author who tells the story of how she was converted to atheism. She was going to university and had signed up with one of the Christian groups. When she was about to go out to a meeting her friends made fun of her. So she didn't go to the meeting and instead became a committed atheist. This is how most people are converted to atheism, by peer pressure.

Has anyone ever tried to convince you of the truth of atheism? No. Because there is no rational argument for atheism. There is no way to prove that God doesn't exist. Atheism is blind, irrational faith.

How do you confront a belief that is fundamentally irrational, But calls itself believing in reason? One way is to try to get people to actually think.

The scientist **Francis Collins** was the head of the genome project at the National Institutes of Health in the United States. He was an atheist, and he realized one day that he had never actually thought about it. Everyone else was an atheist, so he was an atheist too. So he decided to think about it. A local Methodist minister gave him a copy of C. S. Lewis's book *Mere Christianity*, and Collins read it, was convinced by it, and became a Christian.

The argument that convinced him was the argument from morality. Science is amoral. Science looks at the universe as just a giant machine operating according to scientific laws of cause and effect. There is no good and bad there is only the mechanism. Collins was a good scientist. He knew that mechanistic reductionism was an accurate description of science.

Lewis argues that even small children know that there is fair and not fair. And when we say something is not fair, we are appealing to a standard of fairness that is more than just our personal opinion. We appeal to an understanding of fairness in the universe. This convinced Collins that there is something more than science in the universe. There are more things in heaven and earth

Horatio than are dreamt of in your Science.

The argument that convinced me is found in Reihold Neibur's book *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. The argument that convinces me today is the argument from holism. In other words, there are many reasons for believing in God. In fact all the rational arguments are with God.

But the rational arguments are not what convinces us. What convinces us is the experience of God.

I was talking to a former Artistic Director of Prairie Theatre Exchange.

"You believe in God." he said.

"Yeah." I replied.

"You pray." he said.

"Yeah." I replied.

"You believe that God answers prayer." he said.

"Yeah." I replied.

Then he commented, "That must be a really weird world to live in."

Prayer it turns out is a radical act of faith. It means believing in a God who can communicate, A God who can hear, and who can answer. Prayer in a worship service is the first half of the experience. It is in the answer to prayer that we experience God.

I believe in prayer because of my experience of God answering. I could regale you with stories of times in my life when my prayers have been answered. I have some really neat stories. But there is nothing more boring than other people's miracle stories.

Everyone needs to experience their own miracles.

The problem is when people pray, and there is no miracle. We all know this experience. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prays that the cup will pass from him, and it doesn't. He is crucified. St. Paul prays that his thorn in the flesh will be healed, and it's not healed. If you haven't sweated blood and prayed for a miracle, then I'm sure you know people who have. And there has been no miracle.

So people stop praying. They find it hard to believe that god is listening, and that god will answer. This is probably the commonest source of what I call “functional atheism.” People continue to believe in God, in theory. But they stop expecting anything miraculous to happen. By a miracle I don't mean suspending the laws of the universe, but simply an experience of the presence of God.

We experience the presence of God in many different ways. Our faith in God is much more than simply expecting an answer to prayer.

God is historical. God has been here before. We meet God by going to the places where God has been before. We seek out the history of God's presence and god's actions. We go on pilgrimages to holy places. We come to church because it is the house of God.

Singing hymns can be an experience of God. God dwells in the praises of his people. Now I have noticed that when people want to do a public ceremony with a touch of spirituality, they will play Amazing Grace. Hardly anyone there will actually believe that they are a wretch that has been saved by the grace of God. But it generates a nostalgic memory of a lost spirituality. And the nostalgia becomes a substitute for the actual experience of God.

Jesus enters the synagogue in Nazareth, because it is a holy place. He picks up the Bible, because it is a holy book. Jesus does not read from the prophet Isaiah in order to be nostalgic about an old story. He reads it to hear the word of God.

When I was pondering whether God was calling me into the United Church ministry I went to pray in the Chapel at St. John's college, and I found the bible open to that passage in Luke

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind
to set free the oppressed
and announce that the time has come
when the Lord will save his people.”

And I felt that this was God's call to me. I was listening for God's

word to me and this passage from the Bible became God's message to me. And Jesus ends by commenting

“This passage of scripture has come true today even as you heard it being read.”

Jesus hears the call of God on his life. All of us who are followers of Jesus are subject to the same call on our lives. We are called to preach good news to the poor.

I assure you that the need for the peace of Christ is greater than it has ever been. We live in a world of deep anguish. This is not the garden of Eden. This is a fallen world in which you will have suffering. We know this. We worship a crucified God. We worship a god who loves us and who suffers with us. But our god knows a way through suffering. That way is love. People need to find a place of peace, a place of faith, hope and love. That is our calling as followers of Christ. We are called to be part of a holy movement to transform the world.

The changes that were made in United Church structures last December mean that we have become a congregationalist church. It is now pretty much up to each congregation to speak the peace of Christ to the anguish of its time and place, to find ways to reach out to the suffering people of their community, who are trapped in an atheist world of fear, guilt, shame, despair and anger, and offer them a place where they can find peace, where they can find faith, hope and love. You are called to make this church a place where people can really experience the love of the living God.

Today we celebrate meeting God in the sacrament of holy communion.

This place, and the prayers and the hymns and the scripture can be just a nostalgia for God.

But the sacraments require a decision. Jesus has issued a call, and an answer is required of us.

The holiness of this sacrament is not just the words I utter, nor is it just the elements we partake of. The holiness of this sacrament is in our faith, in your faith, and in your commitment in being part of a holy movement to transform a suffering world. To being open to the love and power of God acting through you. It is a

moment of grace, a world of meaning, here in this service.

Here, in this sacrament, is the meaning of life, the meaning of your life.

In the United Church we celebrate two sacraments: baptism and holy communion.

When we are baptized we make a decision. We make a commitment to follow Jesus. The baptism in water washes away our sins and makes us a holy vessel set apart for the service of God, a beloved child of God. The laying on of hands is for the gift of the holy spirit, the spirit of love in our hearts.

The Baptismal decision happens once and for all. But we celebrate communion in order to remember and renew that commitment.

When we partake of this bread we reaffirm our decision to become part of a holy community, to become part of the body of Christ. The whole loaf represents the whole body of Christ. The little piece that we eat represent our part in the fullness of Christ, our part in the church universal and eternal.

We renew our commitment to being part of a holy movement to transform a suffering world.

This cup is the blood, and the blood is the life. When we drink this cup we partake of the life of Christ, of the spirit of Christ. The spirit of love that fills the heart of Jesus, fills our hearts. That sip of the cup is the spirit of Christ filling our hearts with the knowledge of God's love for us.

We are not simply called to a holy mission, we are empowered for that mission. We are empowered by a holy community and by a holy spirit. We are the community of love with the spirit of love in our hearts, We are the children of God.

The god we celebrate in our communion is the living God.

So I bring you a prophetic word, a word of hope that is also a challenge. There is a way forward for the United Church. But it means challenging our atheist culture. It is possible to believe in God and to convince other people to believe in God. But it means rediscovering the rational arguments for God, and above all

renewing the experience of the holy, the experience of the love of God.

Amen. Amen. Amen.