

July 31, 2022
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Meditation: "What's in your barn?"

When we were on vacation we were blessed to escape to a campground on the shores of Lake Mindemoya, on Manitoulin Island for two weeks. We walked, rode our bikes, paddled our inflatable kayaks, ate at some terrific places, read novels, and listened to birds. It was truly restorative.

While travelling to and on the island we saw many barns. We saw big barns and small barns. We saw barns that were filled with livestock, and barns that were full of hay. We saw barns that had farm machinery inside and barns that were empty, and even a few barns that were filled with cars and trailers and boats. We saw barns that were in the process of being raised, r-a-i-s-e-d, and barns that were falling down.

All this was in my mind when I read the parable of the rich fool. He had a bumper crop and his barn was too small to store his crop, so he tore down his barn and built a bigger barn; one that would hold his entire crop.

When I returned to work, this past Monday, there were many emails to sort through. One of them, from Toronto United Church Council, talked about Congregational Vision and the Use of Church Buildings. They identified three primary visions, and how those visions affected the use of the church building.

There are congregations that have a specific focus, like a focus on food, or homelessness. Those buildings, over time, are modified, upgraded, and outfitted to serve their vision focus. For example, a congregation whose focus is on food may set up a community kitchen to help teach people about nutrition, how to cook, and to serve community suppers; a congregation whose focus is on homelessness may set up facilities to run an Out of the Cold program, which might mean adding shower facilities, laundry facilities, and the like.

There are congregations whose vision revolves around hospitality. Those buildings often have a sanctuary that is open during the day for people to use as a quiet place of meditation, or they host community groups like guides and scouts and AA, or they offer the use of their space for other organizations to use as temporary storage for their own missions.

Finally, there are congregations whose vision revolves around mission. They see the church as the place where disciples are raised and spirits are renewed. The church becomes a worship and education centre. Here people learn to become disciples of Jesus, and are fed, spiritually, at weekly worship so they can engage in some form of mission during the week. These congregations may also host other religious groups in their space.

I wondered, if a building can be used in a way that supports a specific vision, could looking at a building reveal what the vision is? I mean, think about the new, bigger barn. What was the vision? Accumulating wealth? And what is the social cost of accumulating wealth? Jesus told this parable to a man who wanted his brother to distribute the family wealth with him, and Jesus warns him against lusting after wealth. The farmer gathers his crop into his new barn, and dies that very night. Instead of seeking to accumulate wealth, perhaps the farmer should have shared the surplus crop with his neighbours, or with the poor in his own village. Perhaps Jesus is saying that being a good neighbour and supporting those in need is preferable to accumulating personal wealth, especially when accumulating wealth comes at the expense of another person.

So what about churches? Can we look at a church and tell what the congregational vision is all about? When I was a child, my family visited Mexico. We travelled widely through central Mexico and visited many churches. Many of them looked like this..... the altar was elaborately

hand carved from wood, and then covered in gold leaf. What does this say about the vision of the congregation, or the leadership of the church? Now consider that there was a large square in front of most of these churches, and those squares were filled with people who were crippled or living in abject poverty and were begging for enough coins to feed themselves and their families for that day. Does that change your thought on the accumulation of wealth within the sanctuary?

What would people say the vision is of this congregation if they took a close look at the building? What do you say is your vision? Is it hospitality with the Holy Diner? Is it food, or homelessness, or some other social issue? Is it a sense of preparing disciples for mission? Is it a club where you attend to be seen and to make connections for your life outside the club? Is it something else?

I'm not asking this question rhetorically. I really want to know what you think your vision is as a congregation. Please, send me an email, a text message, write me a letter, call me on the phone, or talk to me in person. What is your vision?

And when you figure that out, ask yourself another question. If this congregation were to go the way of so many the last few years.... If this congregation were to close, in a year, in five years, in fifty years..... what do you want your legacy in this community to be? Will it be an empty, falling down barn, or a place of sanctuary, or a place brimming with life?