

June 30, 2024
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 8

Meditation: “What business are you in?”

I was in a coffee shop recently. The place was packed. It was so busy that people who didn't know one another were sharing tables. I overheard the conversation of a couple of businessmen. One said to another, I have only two questions. What business are you in? and How's business?

What business are you in? and How's business? Those are two questions we should ask around the church. What business is the church in? and How's business? I think most of you could answer the second question with relative ease, but I got to thinking, how many of you could answer the first question? So, what business is the church in?

Transformation: personal first, and then the world.

The story of the hemorrhaging woman. Twelve years she focused entirely on her medical condition. Every penny, every ounce of energy, every thought, every effort went to stopping the flow of blood. The flow meant that she was ritually unclean and had to separate herself from people. She could not sit or sleep where others sat or slept, for to sit where she had sat would render one unclean as she was unclean. And then, with the touch of a tassel, she was whole and clean once again. Her life was transformed in an instant. And I don't mean just her health. I mean her entire life was utterly transformed. No longer did her condition consume all of her wealth. No longer did her condition consume all of her physical and spiritual energy. No longer did her condition consume her every thought or her very life. And, now that she was clean once more, she was free to be with people, to sit at the table and break bread with them, to mingle with them in the marketplace, to hug a friend, or hold the hand of a child. For twelve years, her every thought had been turned inward, on herself, and now, she could turn her focus outward. Now she could be with and think of others and she could thank God for her cure.

At a continuing education course I was at some years back we learned about the institutional church. For decades the church has been chronically ill, and church leaders and church goers seem to be completely at a loss to turn things around. For hundreds of years the church has operated as an institution, on an attractional basis – sort of like Tim Horton’s franchises, build it and people will come. It has sought members to join. It has created mission statements, elected officers, and encouraged endowments. It has measured assets, made budgets, and received pledges. It has celebrated increases in numbers, built with bricks and mortar, and depended on human resources to accomplish attainable goals. It has recruited people to serve on committees, relied on donations, and dedicated monuments to memorialize past accomplishments. It has trained its leaders to manage. It has also been inwardly focused, existing for the sake of its members. It has sought prestige, to be first and best. It has become maintenance oriented, and I don’t just mean maintaining the building, although that is part of what I mean. I mean that it has focused on maintaining the institution, the courts of the church, committees, boards, regional councils, national office. That church, the one that operates as an attractional institution, its days are numbered. I didn’t really need to go to the course to learn that. It’s obvious; the signs are all around us and have been for decades.

What we did learn about was that there is a new church, a transformed church emerging from the old. This emerging church operates more like a movement than an institution. The word given to describe it is incarnational. How is it different than the attractional church, the church that we are all familiar with? Well, instead of seeking members to join, it seeks a need to fulfil. Instead of having a mission statement, it has a mission. Instead of electing officers it seeks to inspire passionate people. Instead of encouraging endowments, it encourages selfless living. Instead of measuring assets, it measures passion. Instead of making budgets and receiving pledges, it makes commitments and gives everything. Instead of celebrating increases in numbers it celebrates lives changed. Instead of building with bricks and mortar, it builds with flesh and blood. Instead of depending on human resources to accomplish attainable goals, it depends on God’s resources to accomplish seemingly impossible visions. Instead of recruiting people to serve on committees, it seeks to attract people to change the world. Instead of relying on donations, it relies on self-

sacrifice and the grace of God. Instead of dedicating monuments to past accomplishments, it celebrates lives transformed and moves on. Instead of training its leaders to manage, it creates leaders who are willing to die for the mission (ouch, that one pinches). Instead of having an inward focus, it has an outward focus, existing for needy people. Instead of seeking prestige, it seeks sacrifice, serving the last and the least, the unloved, the unlovely and the unlovable. Instead of being maintenance oriented, it is mission driven. This new emerging incarnational church is led by people who are called by God, not by people who have the right academic credentials. It challenges people to go and serve, not to come and join. It provides risky opportunities, not a safe environment where nothing ever changes. It invites passionate people to fulfil a mission, not accepting resumes to fill job descriptions. This is the church that will survive. It is a church that has been transformed.

Tomorrow is Canada Day, and I have only two questions. What in our country needs to be transformed, and how can the church play a role in that transformation? As for the first question, I would say that we are beneficiaries of those who came before us, those who, although they may have been well intentioned in their day, did great harm to the peoples who already occupied this land. The one thing that needs transformation, perhaps more than anything else, is the relationship between First Nations peoples and those who have arrived in the last five hundred years. As to the second question, how do we do this, that is up to all of us to figure out.

The relationship between First Nations and Newcomers is like the hemorrhaging woman's problem. It is a problem that has existed for years and will continue to exist for years to come. It is a problem that much money has been thrown at and yet it persists. It is a drain on our resources, and I don't mean just money. What we really need is to be able to reach out and touch the hem of Jesus' garment, or perhaps just to be willing to reach out and have our hearts touched by one another.

A book I just finished reading on the apostle Paul argues that Paul, in talking about works of the law and faith, declares that law establishes information, not transformation. Law informs the conscience externally. Faith, by which Paul means a relationship of commitment and trust, is what empowers conscience internally. Faith is what drives transformation. In other words, commitment to and trust in one another is what makes transformation possible. Let's go transform the things in our country that really need transforming and make this an even better place to live and work and play for each and every person in this country, First Nation and newcomer alike. And may God be with us all in the journey.