

September 15, 2024
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19

Meditation: Satan comes a callin’

Poor Peter. He meant well. Everyone knew that the Messiah would be a military leader who would liberate the land of Israel from foreign rule. Sure, right now it was the Romans, but before them it was the Greeks, the Babylonians, and the Assyrians. The Messiah would not only kick the Romans out, but make sure that nobody else took over. And now Jesus is saying that he must be betrayed, suffer, and die. “No. Say it aint so, Jesus.” And how does Jesus respond, he called him Satan – the adversary.

Have you ever been well intentioned only to have it blow up in your face?

In a way, it was a good thing that Satan, I mean Peter, had called Jesus out. You see, Peter, and almost every single Jewish person along with him, had misunderstood the nature of the Messiah. Now that it was out in the open, it became a teachable moment.

Speaking of teachable moments, I’ve had three days of them this past week. I attended the reVITALize conference at Metropolitan United Church, and their Fairmont campus. One of the first speakers, David Wood, was from the Ivey School of Business at UWO. He spoke about the six steps to turn around a failing business. Step two was to challenge your business model. In other words, ask yourself, “have we lost sight of our purpose?”

Jesus asked the disciples, “who do others say that I am?” and “who do you say that I am?” But I ask you, “what do you say is the primary purpose of the church?”

And, “what would Jesus say is the primary purpose of the church?”

One of the repeated messages of a number of speakers was about spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines. Four spiritual disciplines that were identified as absolutely critical to turning around the current state of the church were:

Prayer, Studying Scripture, Worship, and Sharing the Faith – also known as Evangelism.

When asked about the state of evangelism in the mainline churches, John Bowen, the now retired professor of evangelism at Wycliffe College in Toronto, responded, “we’d be more likely to share the good news if we were convinced that it is good news.”

So I ask you, “what do you say is the good news that the church has to offer?”

And, “what would Jesus say is the good news?”

Today, right about now, Bishop Todd Townshend is speaking across the street at the 170th anniversary of St. Peter’s. On Friday evening, he was at Met, speaking to us about the importance of “Practicing the Practices.” He was talking about the importance of doing the work of engaging spiritual practices or disciplines in order to develop spiritually. And when we develop spiritually, we better understand what it is that Christianity has to offer this broken world, and then we will be more willing to articulate that to those we come into contact with, and that will be the start of the renewal of the church.

The Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, who for 40 years was the lead pastor at MCC in Toronto, also talked of the importance of spiritual practices. He told us that he believes the primary failing of the United Church of Canada is its failure to link Social Justice (which we are well known for) and Spirituality. He believes that if we can do that, we will be on to something. He also said that he believes that the United Church of Canada is uniquely positioned to grow into a meaningful church once again. He said there are three things we need to do that. We need to be Vibrant in the same degree that many evangelical churches are vibrant, only without the horrid theology. We need to be Inclusive, check. And we need to be Progressive in our theology, check (at least at the national level, if not in every congregation).

Jesus was able to teach Peter, and everyone else with ears to listen or eyes to read the newspaper report or social media post, that what made the Messiah strong wasn’t violent force, but vulnerable love. In Jesus, God set aside God’s

power, position, ego, and so on, and entered time and space. In Jesus, God became vulnerable, knew human emotions: joy at a wedding banquet, sorrow at the death of a friend, and knew human frailties, experienced thirst and hunger, betrayal and injustice, execution and death. Thank God! For only a God who knows what it means to be a fragile, mortal being can truly offer us hope.

Peter had to be a disciple – a learner – one more time. He had to lay down his preconceived ideas, desires, agendas, ego, and so on, and learn from and follow his Lord and Saviour. And Peter is the rock on which the church is built.

Many in our society think that Christianity is about giving intellectual assent to a set of fantastical stories and ideas, and often they get the ideas flat out wrong. Jesus calls us to be disciples – learners – to study, look carefully, think carefully, question, learn, and finally, to emulate what we see Jesus doing.

I don't really think that Jesus came to start a new religion. I think Jesus came to reform Judaism, but he wasn't entirely successful, and we wound up with a breakaway group who started the Christian church.

Jesus invites us to play a cosmic version of follow the leader. He doesn't say it will be easy. In fact, he all but guarantees that it won't be easy, and, he does promise to walk the road ahead of us, and alongside of us, just as he did with those early disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Thank God Satan came a callin', for without that, we would have missed an important teachable moment.