

Sermon Easter 7 C 2016

It is good to be here this morning—to soak up God’s love and to be gathered together as God’s children from so many different households. Each of us is welcomed and embraced along with whatever longing and needs we have, whether it be the thrill of exuberant hope or the weight of loneliness, loss, anxiety or worry. It is good to be here to let go of our burdens and to entrust them into God’s care and to be fed with the spiritual food of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. It is good to come and seek together how God is inviting us into partnership with him to carry on his work of healing, reconciliation, and love. We come to be strengthened, encouraged, nurtured, healed, challenged and sent forth, renewed in his love. We come to church for so many reasons.

BUT

If you were born between 1925 and 1945, there is a 60 percent chance that you re in church today.

If you were born between 1946 and 1964, there is a 40 percent chance that you re in church today.

If you were born between 1965 and 1983, there is a 20 percent chance that you re in church today.

If you were born after 1984, there is less than a 10 percent chance that you re in church today.

And yet, people are not less hungry for God now than they were then, in fact, Americans report that they are seeking spiritual connections. According to the Pew research Center, “Americans have become less religious in recent years by standard measures such as how important they say religion is to them and their frequency of religious service attendance and prayer. But, at the same time,” ...there has been a rise in spirituality among both highly religious people and the religiously unaffiliated.

Missional Church expert Alan Roxburgh calls these past 50 years the great unraveling of mainline denominations. Many reports, studies and statistics have been analyzed over the past 50 years as people try to find the trends that

affect church growth and decline, and subsequently try to find the solution to the widespread and accelerated decline in church attendance over the past fifteen years. He notes that

1. up until the 1960s, mainline denominations experienced a period of flourishing and saw themselves at the center of North American society.
2. Beginning in the mid-1960s that ended. The unraveling had begun, and for the past 50 years, church members have become anxious about finding a way to get back to the center of society. They tried all kinds of programs and strategies aimed at church growth, church health, and church renewal. Their anxiety and narrative of scarcity has driven people to try to fix churches. The problem is this shifts the focus away from God and toward the institution. "These churches have so turned in on themselves that they presume the church is the primary focus of their energy; they work at being attractational, on growing, on meeting needs and helping people or on designing programs to send a segment of their members to serve outside their walls and in their...They have lost the capacity to discern the disruptive work of the Spirit beyond their circles."
3. The good news is that God's Spirit is calling these churches on a different journey. After fifty years of unraveling, people might be ready to hear the Spirit's voice in new ways.¹

Jesus prayed for his disciples, saying, "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

"Father...I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Jesus prayed for us and for all who believe in him through our word... so that the love with which the Father loved Jesus may be in us, and, and that Jesus himself be in us. As we listen to this affirmation of how Jesus is present in our midst, God's Spirit may be inviting us to shift our focus from finding solutions

¹ Alan Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking the Church, Changing the World*, Morehouse, 2015. p. 37

for fixing the church to focusing on how God is present in our lives and in our neighborhood. This is an invitation to seismic shift in priorities.

In December of 2014 The Episcopal Church TREC, (the reimagining of the Episcopal Church) committee submitted a report to General Convention that suggests how we can make this shift and change the conversation. It states: “the Church began as a movement, not an institution... The most important thing we can do together in this moment is return to the three basic practices that helped animate the early Christian movement. We believe that, rather than an anxious focus on how to preserve our institution, a joyful focus on the basic practices of the movement will hold the real key for moving us into God’s future...

“Follow Jesus together. The Episcopal Church’s identity is rooted in Jesus and his Way. The renewal of our Church will come only through discerning the shape of that Way and practicing it together in the power of the Spirit. Christianity is an embodied way of life, not just an institution or set of ideas. The Episcopal Church has a distinct and rich heritage of interpreting and expressing Jesus’ Way. Every local church and every Episcopalian must be called to follow Jesus more deeply.

“Into the neighborhood. Jesus sends us together into the places where ordinary life unfolds. We are sent to testify to God’s reign as we form and restore community by sharing in God’s peacemaking and healing. This begins with deep listening to neighbors, relying upon their hospitality rather than expecting them to find us on our terms. In today’s increasingly diverse world, we must learn how to bear witness to, and receive from, those of different cultures, faiths, and beliefs, ... For many churches now disconnected from neighbors, this will mean attempting small experiments in sharing God’s peace as we learn how to form Christian community and witness with those neighbors.

“Travel lightly. Jesus sends us out empty-handed so that we might rely upon God’s abundance, which sometimes comes to us through the hospitality of our neighbors. ... Traveling lightly means going in vulnerability, risking being changed by God and our neighbors.” --ENGAGING GOD'S MISSION IN THE 21ST

CENTURY: FINAL REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE FOR REIMAGINING THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Alan Roxburgh suggests five practices for becoming God-centered rather than church-centered. They are listening, discerning, testing and experimenting, reflecting, and deciding.

Our first invitation, then, is to listen: to listen to one another, to listen to Scripture, and to listen to the people in our neighborhood. He writes, “As people share stories with one another, they discover that someone else has experienced God in the midst. After a time, this capacity to practice listening to one another in a new way grows and this experience of naming God’s presence in one another takes hold.”² Jesus prayed for us: “Father...I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” We have an amazing identity: a people inhabited by the loving presence of Jesus Christ. How do we perceive that amazing presence in one another?

What if we made a conscious effort to connect with each other about our spiritual hopes, aspirations, challenges and experience? What if we invited each other to talk about how God is present in our experience? What if we asked each other questions like: “When have you most experienced God’s presence in this congregation? What have been the most life-giving experiences for you in this congregation? Where might you have seen God at work this week?” We could listen to each other’s stories about seeking and finding God, and finally, we could hear each other’s excitement about joining God is God’s mission: the mission of helping everyone know God’s loving and reconciling work. What if each of us looked for an opportunity to have that conversation this week and to really listen to each other’s stories? Imagine how amazing it would be to give each other our attention and to look for God’s life-giving presence right here in our midst.

² Ibid p. 59