

BORN OF THE SPIRIT

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Camrose United Church
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Isaiah 6: 1-8 - A vision of God in the Temple
Psalm 29 (*Voices United 755*) - The God of Heaven
Romans 8: 12-17 - Life in the Spirit
John 3: 1-17 - Nicodemus visits Jesus

I have noticed that there is a middle age group that is missing from our church. You may have noticed that, too. As a matter of fact, for many of you that is the age range of your children. I know there are many in our United Church whose adult children have lost interest in the church, and that is distressing for many. But more than just for our own children, the United Church has realized that there is a whole segment of our Canadian society that seems not to notice us. For this reason, Emerging Spirit began with a research project, hiring research people to focus on people in the 30-45 year age group within Canada to find out their attitudes toward the United Church. They focussed only on people who didn't have a religious affiliation of any kind.

They found two very interesting things. Most of those people knew nothing about the United Church. It's not that they knew something and decided to reject it; it's just that they would say "United what?" As the researchers delved into specifics, they talked about some of the characteristic aspects of the United Church of Canada such as our inclusivity, our openness to diversity, our commitment to social justice making a difference to the world around us, and our openness to the spiritual journey and exploring faith. What they discovered was that a significant portion of those people in that 30-45 year age group who knew nothing about the United Church of Canada would actually be interested in learning a little more about that kind of a church--a church that is quite different from the stereotype they had of the Christian church. So that is the first stage of the project.

The second stage isn't set yet, but the proposal for that stage is coming to the General Council which meets this August. So next fall we will be hearing about the next stage. The proposal involves eventually running an advertising campaign for the United Church, a campaign that is very narrowly targeted--as is much advertising these days--to that particular group within our society. The first thought was to do television advertising, but as they looked more closely they realized that's probably not the best way to reach that particular segment. They are now thinking of advertising in some specialized periodical magazines. In conjunction with that, actually in preparation for that, they are going to be running training programs for leaders in the church to learn how to be prepared as congregations to welcome and embrace these 30-45 year olds for whom the church is brand new. So that's all coming up. I thought I would use this as an opportunity to give a little advance notice because we should all be paying attention to it. If you want to know more about it, there is a lot of information on the United Church website for those of you who use the internet.

That is a setting for interpreting the passages that Mary [Durand] read today. I've been giving much thought to Emerging Spirit because we hear a lot about it at Conference. And as I was reading today's three passages--the story about Nicodemus in John's gospel and his conversation with Jesus, the words from Paul in the Book of Romans where he talks about the difference between the old and the new way of life, and Isaiah himself telling the story about his call and his experience in the temple--I thought it would be interesting if we had those three

people sitting down together and having a conversation about the United Church of Canada today, or maybe about the whole church. Through them we might get some insights into what it is that we need to communicate because it is very clear that there is a substantial segment of the population of Canada with whom the United Church is just not communicating, to whom the United Church is just not visible, and who have a wrong stereotypical image of the United Church.

So we have before us as a church this challenge to change the image of the United Church of Canada in the minds of people who need in their hearts and their spirit what the United Church of Canada has to offer. What would be the difference; what would we be trying to communicate? I imagined talking to Nicodemus, Paul, and Isaiah, about this because in a way I hear in this morning's three passages some of what we need to help us understand the necessary shift in our image.

If we were to ask Nicodemus how we need to change the popular image of the United Church, I imagine he might reflect on his conversation with Jesus and say: "You know, I went to Jesus because I realized there was something important here and I wanted to know how to embrace that. And he said to me you have to be born again. And in my old way of thinking I thought that's not possible because I thought I'm too old, I've lived a long life. How can I be born again; how can anything new happen in my life? And you know, maybe the United Church looks like that to some people. In other words, the church is a church into which you have to be born. You have to be baptized there, you have to go to Sunday School, you have to go to the youth group, and you have to do all those things right from the beginning of your life. And if you haven't done that, if you are into your adulthood and you haven't done any of that, maybe you're lost because if someone new goes to the United Church everyone talks in acronyms and initials like 'U.C.W.' as if everybody in the world knows what that means. Well, what that says to new people is that we really don't want to welcome them unless they have been here all their lives. So there's a stereotype that religious life is something one must get in on at the beginning of life, not something that can be started half way through." That might be a useful insight that Nicodemus would offer.

And then we turn to Paul who picks up on that. He says: "Well, yes, I can see that because many people have a view of God such that if they were to be followers of God it would be like becoming slaves or puppets with God controlling everything they do--giving rules and orders that we have to follow. Maybe that's part of the negative stereotype that people have of the church today--that being church members just means being good and following all of the rules and acting like puppets or slaves of God. That doesn't sound very attractive. No wonder people aren't interested."

And then Isaiah pipes up: "Well, you know, when I first experienced my sense of calling it was this marvellous vision in the temple. I stood there and just felt the majesty and the glory of God and the singing of praise. But you know what that made me feel like? It made me feel small and impure and unworthy because I had the sense that being in God's presence meant being pure. I knew I wasn't pure. As a matter of fact I live in a whole world of impurity. So maybe people feel that with the United Church as well. Maybe they think that to go to church is to be pure. And so they think they can't go to church because they sure aren't pure; or else they take a closer look at those people who do go to church and notice they're not pure either and therefore are a bunch of hypocrites and 'I don't want to be part of them.'" It's sort of like Woody Allen's line: "I wouldn't want to belong to an organization that would have me for a member."

So we would define the problem with insights from all three of these people--Nicodemus, Paul, Isaiah--who are such important people in our story. We would then ask them what we need to change, and how do we change from that to what we really want people to see and know about

us? Nicodemus could just carry right on with what he is saying, with his experience: “I was in the temple and felt that way, and I felt I’m hopeless. Then I had the vision of this seraph bringing the burning coal and touching my lips, and somehow that just burned away all that sense of my past. It’s not that it changed it; it just made it so that it didn’t matter any more. What I was experiencing in God’s presence was not the demand for purity, but a call, a sense of purpose, a sense of mission. So I was no longer concerned about my own purity, about myself. I got drawn out of myself and directed toward doing something in the world that would make a difference for others. Maybe that’s what you need to say to people that the United Church is about. It’s not about some place to be pure and self-congratulatory. It’s about being given a purpose in life, an opportunity to reach beyond oneself and to make a real difference in the world--to be channels of that life-transforming love. That’s what you need to tell people--that there’s a call, that there’s a mission, that there’s a purpose here.”

And then Paul might pick up the conversation: “Yes. That’s right. There’s a purpose. That’s exactly right, Isaiah. You’ve got it. God gives us a purpose. But there’s an important distinction here. Following God’s purpose and God’s will doesn’t mean turning into a puppet, following rules, being mindless. It’s the opposite; it’s so different from that. It’s like in our Roman households--we have parents, the lord of the household, and the children who are raised to be heirs of the family. And we have slaves. The slaves are owned and they never get to go anywhere. It’s as if we are no longer slaves of God, but rather are adopted as members of the household as children of God. Can you imagine that? Children, and therefore brothers and sisters of Christ, and therefore co-heirs with Christ? That’s what it is like. And so you need to tell people that this church is not a church where one turns into a slave or a puppet. You need to tell people that the church is a place where one turns into an adopted daughter or son of the household and becomes an heir of the whole grace and glory of God, where one comes into something where there is a sense of belonging in a relationship and a love. That’s what you need to tell people that the United Church is.”

And at that point Nicodemus jumps back into the conversation: “Yes, that’s right. But it’s not being adopted just as a child, physically in the flesh. It’s being adopted at any time of life, and over and over again because the Spirit comes into us, touches us with this presence of the sacred, and we are born in the Spirit as a lifelong process of renewal. So it’s not just something for children like being born in the flesh. Rather, it’s something for all of us who become children anew, no matter how old we are, by being born in the Spirit. It’s a lifelong journey that actually doesn’t have the best early in life. It has the best at the end because it keeps getting richer and deeper and more wonderful as we carry on this life journey. The reason is that it’s boring if people see spiritual life as something that is fixed when they are young and static for the rest of their lives. You have got to tell people that life in the United Church of Canada is about this amazing journey throughout the whole of life, following the Spirit and being renewed ever again and again and again.”

This is what the church offers all who enter into communion with God, into communion with the faith community hearing the word and nourishing our souls at the table, living as people adopted, called, and ever new, born again in the Spirit.

Transcribed and edited for publication by Sue and By Reesor