

A TEMPTATION OR A TEST?

Deuteronomy 8: 2-3; Matthew 4: 1-11

The year is 2033, 10 years from now. The cemeteries are full of churches that have not survived. There are at least three kinds of churches buried here...

There is type A church. This church was preoccupied with money. Every time some idea was brought forward to try this or that, there were those who argued the church could not afford it. Deficits and fear of deficits defined what risks they were prepared to take. In fact, cutbacks had to be made because otherwise the church would go under. Well, even with cuts, the deficits kept increasing as fewer and fewer people participated and invested in a church that had no new ideas and ventured no significantly new directions. Simply making the budget and saving money, cutting costs, generating rental income and fundraising as an end in itself sucked all the energy and vision out of why the church existed. Deficits kept increasing even as the leaders became more desperate and pleaded with folks to give more... Eventually they had to close and the money from assets was given over to the larger denominational body.

Then there is type B church. This church was preoccupied with playing it safe in terms of issues of justice and relevance that the church could be engaged in. Potential controversy had to be avoided. Politics would send important church members running. But did the church stand for something that mattered? Was it willing to risk something for the sake of a higher justice and love? Did the church exist to be safe and comfortable, or to follow the Jesus who was crucified for the vision of God's rule he was proclaiming? Eventually, this church had to close down also. A church that doesn't stand for something and willing to risk doing so, is not a church many care to be a part of any longer. The property was sold and its furniture disbursed. The larger church body got the money and donated it to housing projects. Very worthwhile, no doubt, but what about a worshipping community of people?

Finally there is type C church. This church was taken with the corporate mega church model. It's all about the numbers and the money. That's how you measure success. What programs and issues will the church take on? It's not about whether it's faithful to Jesus, but whether it will draw people in and increase the revenue. A successful and prosperous church is a sign of God's blessing. Relevance is about the latest fad, contemporary music, hip leaders, getting in the young people because youth are the future... That's what you aim for. And yet, anyone

involved in this corporate style vision will eventually leave if the church's focus has been the constant growth in the numbers and money rather than spiritual growth. The problem with spiritual growth, however, is that it is less visible and it takes time. It doesn't happen in a simple, straightforward way and it requires substance and depth to which the leaders must devote themselves over many years. How do you measure that quantitatively?

Well, the corporate style mega church must measure growth quantitatively. It must make a splash in the world people of influence will notice. It has to draw in people who are positive, happy, successful and have money to give. It needs youth because youth are the future. But is money and quantitative growth an end in itself? Is it willing to risk it all for the sake of love and justice like Jesus did even if half the congregation leaves? Will it trust a God who raises the dead, and especially those dead who have not been distracted by shallow appearances of success but have given themselves to the solid work of building a community where people weep with each other as much as they laugh together? Unless a church is able to support the grieving well, is it fit to call itself a church of the Christ who suffered in solidarity with all the suffering?

Well, it's hard to predict what the landscape of church will look like 10 years from now. But Covid has certainly accelerated certain trends that church sociologists have been identifying for decades now. There is a decline in church attendance, participation and donations. Those churches with capital investments can keep things going for a while, but what about the people? How long before church is no longer viable?

Well, these are important questions for every church. On this Annual meeting Sunday, these are also important questions for us here at Armour Heights. Where do we fit into this larger trajectory of decline? Well, rather than simply pat ourselves on the back given our well-being as a church bucking the trend, I do want to zero in on the three types of churches identified. These three represent three temptations to which many churches succumb.

A temptation is something that can bring us down. But the very same challenge that becomes a temptation to demise can also become a test that we can pass, a test that can actually make us stronger. Jesus, too, went through three temptations at the very beginning of his ministry. But how did Jesus turn his temptations into tests that made him stronger and clearer in his discernment of his way forward? If we call ourselves a church of Jesus Christ, it behooves us, also, to discern our way ahead in the face of similar temptations. As we gather to hold our

Annual General Meeting after church today, we too, must reflect on where we have been and where we need to go as a church worthy of the name of Jesus.

OK, then, let's take a deeper dive into our scripture readings in search of revelatory guidance to light our way. Jesus is in the wilderness, just like the Hebrew people were in the wilderness on their way to an imagined promised land. The journey was as important as the destination. For in and through the journey, they would discover and grow the kind of spiritual qualities needed to be a congregation of God's people together. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul gives these spiritual qualities the names: faith, hope and love. How does Jesus ground himself in the faith, hope and love he will need for the journey? Where many of the people succumb to their temptations, Jesus passes them as tests that make him stronger and clearer in his vocation as Messiah. So what are these temptations about?

First of all, our Old Testament reading points to the situation of the people facing hunger in the wilderness. Bread is food. Bread represents the tangible resources necessary to make a go of it. Without bread we cannot survive. But the temptation here is that bread becomes our focus. The temptation is that rather than faith and hope, fear takes over and shapes much of our preoccupation. We become afraid of risking anything because we may not have the resources to sustain us through it. We do not have the faith that spending ourselves for a good purpose will bring blessings we cannot see. We do not have the hope that we will receive so much more than we will ever give, even if the giving seems beyond what we have.

Jesus must trust that God's Word and God's vision for the people must come first and foremost, and the bread from heaven will supply the tangible need. Jesus is hungry for tangible bread, but Jesus also becomes clear that the spiritual bread of faith, hope and love is the most important nutrition he needs for the journey he must make as Messiah. A church that is committed to a faith and hope which risks, gives and commits in the name of love is the only kind of church that will be blessed with sufficient tangible bread to make it through. We need to risk spending, prudently and wisely, yes, but spending and investing in helping people and building infrastructure for wider and deeper reach of people. We cannot be determined by fear or deficits and all our energy cannot be siphoned off by fundraising. Mission, Spirit-filled worship, biblical learning, prayer and justice work, building community around faith, hope and tangible love... this is what makes a church of Jesus Christ that will turn a temptation to fear into a test we pass that makes us stronger and clearer in our vision and mission.

Second, the temptation Jesus must face is fear of injury, hurt, violence, torture and death. Why? If he risks his life because he will speak out and fight for justice for those broken and risk all for love of those most neglected, and if he gathers people around him and fills them with faith and hope in the power of love to change their world, the authorities will try to stop him any way they can. Is Jesus willing to risk his very life for justice and love, or will he succumb to the temptation to play it safe? Once again, Jesus will pass the test and be clear about his way ahead. He must trust he will have bread enough for the journey and he must trust that God's justice and love must win even if his very life will be imperilled.

So what about us here today as church? Are we willing to risk not only spending and being spent for building community, but also putting our energy into a mission and ministry of love and justice even when this is risky, controversial and even unpopular to some who have the money? Do we have enough faith, hope and love for that? Are we clear what our mission and purpose must be about as the body of Christ we call ourselves? Are we willing to be loud and proud about what we believe in: an inclusive and generous love and a justice that will stand on the side of the marginalized even when those with the power and money may possibly be offended?

Third and finally, Jesus must face the temptation of the desire for success and glory on the world's terms. He can be a great leader amassing the powerful and influential around him. He can gather the money and the support for a tangible kingdom if he befriends the rich and powerful rather than criticize them in solidarity with the marginalized, impoverished and those abused by the system... The poor have no money to give and no power to protect Jesus from harm. They have no worldly glory or success to make possible either. All they have is their need for love and perhaps their gratitude. And yet, Jesus will see in them the face of God and the call of God. Faith, hope and love in God's vision of a more equitable world will be Jesus' food for the journey and the fulfillment of his heart and soul. God's glory is not the world's glory, and success is measured in the quality of love invisible in tangible terms, yet offering a weight of pure gold in hearts and lives...

So what about us here today as church? Where is our glory and success as church? How do we measure it? I can only speak about the past 6 years here at Armour Heights. The leaders of the congregation have had the courage to take some bold steps. We have been spending money to build up this community and support outreach partnerships well beyond anything the congregation has done before. We have also put ourselves out there in proclaiming the justice of God when it comes to inclusion, in truth and healing toward reconciliation, in supporting the

building of cultural diversity and refugee support on a scale well beyond what the congregation has known in the past. But so far, any temptation to fear of over-spending and under-receiving, any temptation of fear in putting ourselves out there too openly and loudly when it comes to justice and love, and any temptation to make tangible success on the world's terms our measure, have been tests we have passed, making us clearer and stronger in our identity and vision as a community of faith, the body of Christ, his hands, feet and heart in the world.

However, we must continue to commit to these priorities... for money can come and go, as people may come and go... and whether the church makes a splash in the wider community people will notice or not, our commitment is to God in Christ, and our communion must be powered by the Holy Spirit, not simply by dollars and cents or the presence of those who carry influence in the world... If we follow the Jesus of the gospels, we will continue to zero in on those places of pain and hurt in our world, and those who know there need for the bread of heaven above the tangible bread that fills bank accounts...

Will all this keep paying off? If our measure is genuine spiritual growth in changed lives, in people's basic inner needs met by a congregation of God's people who really care because they know their first call is to be the hands, feet and heart of Jesus... then it most definitely will pay off. We must keep turning our temptations to fear into tests we pass, growing our faith, hope and love, and further grounding ourselves in our mission as a congregation of Jesus powered by his Spirit... What do you think?

Amen.