

A VISION OF CHURCH FOR ARMOUR HEIGHTS

Luke 4: 16-30; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27

I was a minister in a new congregation. After meeting with the Christian Education Committee, we organized some events. One of these was an Advent Breakfast. A group of us worked on a program that would engage all ages. Another group organized and planned an amazing breakfast to go along with it. We had energy and excitement. But as a minister I also carried some anxiety. Would people respond? Would people come out? While many were involved and taking responsibility for different parts of the event, ultimately, the success or failure of an event like this I knew would be something that would define my ministry. A lot was at stake.

And so, the day came, the time came. We were ready. The tables and chairs were set up in a specific way to facilitate interaction. The hall was decorated. There were specially designed place settings and posters on the walls. The food was ready to be served with servers standing behind the breakfast counter. It was time. But, the start time came and went and... nobody came into the hall! Was something wrong? Had we made a mistake in our communication of the start time? The heat of stress began rising through my body from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. I encouraged the organizers and planners: "Don't worry. Let's see what happens." Five more minutes went by... and then another five... Nobody!

And then, I heard a familiar shuffling walk down the hall. It was Keith. Keith had been associated with the congregation for a while. He lived in a small apartment near the church. Keith's shuffling walk was due to a stroke he had suffered as a child and it affected his movement thereafter. But Keith got around and with government support, he was able to live independently and get involved in different activities. Keith was also a people person. He loved to interact and ask questions, sometimes very personal ones. If you didn't know Keith, such questions could feel really uncomfortable. Those who knew him, though, just enjoyed him. He was part of the church family.

Well, Keith was the only one there so far that morning. Boy did he get the royal treatment! Everyone crowded around him with "Good morning" and "welcome" and "let me take your jacket" and "here's a seat for you" and "can I get you some coffee... tell me how you like it" and I even offered to take him through the breakfast counter and show him each and every food item so he could tell me what he wanted and I could get a plate for him and serve him. Wow! This is how royalty and privilege get served. The truth is, though, if there was a crowd

that had walked in at that time, I wonder whether Keith would have gotten that kind of attention and welcome. But with him being the only one, he got it all.

Now, eventually, other people did come and the event was a success, although it was a bit of a surprise who did and who didn't come out. There were many with good intentions who ended up being too busy to come. But there were others, like Keith, for whom an opportunity to have a nice meal, warm fellowship and welcome, and a chance to learn and engage with others was fullness and joy.

Experiences like these also taught me things, things about what the church is about in this day and age. Sometimes the most important learning is the learning that comes in ways you least expect it and through means you'd never expect. What could Keith contribute to the church? Keith lived on government disability allowance. He had little money to contribute and too often, he would come in and go out from any activity or worship service marching to the beat of his own drum. And yet, Keith loved people and felt at home in this church community. But more than that, Keith was the face of Christ teaching me and us some important lessons about our call and vision as church. What were these lessons? Let me highlight three lessons based on our scripture readings.

First, in our gospel reading, Jesus is at his home town of Nazareth on the Sabbath day. Everyone is at Synagogue. It's early in his ministry and so, people don't know what Jesus is planning to be and do yet, although they have heard something about his gifts as a healer. As a returning son to his home-town and the eldest male of his household, though, he's asked to read the scriptures. Like our lectionary readings every Sunday, there would be specific readings for every Sabbath in the Synagogue as well. The reading Jesus is given happens to be from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour..." These are words from Isaiah about Isaiah's own call as a prophet. But Jesus hears in Isaiah's words his own call as Messiah. Jesus' call as Messiah is to bring good news, freedom, healing and hope to people, and the specific people who will benefit most will be those who are especially in need of some good news, freedom, healing and hope – the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed.

But what about you and me? Do we need some good news? Do we need some freedom in some way? Do we need some healing and hope? And this is the first point I want to make about our vision as a church. Our purpose and our fulfillment as followers of messiah Jesus is to offer good news, freedom, healing and hope to those who need it most, those who desire it most, those who recognize their need for it most. We all need these things if we recognize our need for such things. But I bet the Keiths of the world recognize their need in a way many others do not. They are there at the front of the line for breakfast while many

others are too busy and too preoccupied by life to recognize their need for something only the fellowship of Jesus can provide in the way it does. Whether we do it with Evangel Hall, or ARISE or Portland Place, or Southern Cameroon or Presbyterians Sharing or PWS&D or many other ways and means we do it, we are here to share the good news, freedom, healing and hope of Jesus with our warm welcome, our hearts, our time and our money. That's what gives us focus and purpose in gathering together and worshipping together. We share good news, freedom, healing and hope with the world and we share it with each other every time we make time to gather together to worship, to fellowship, to sing, pray, mourn together and celebrate together.

But here's the thing: The Keiths of the world have nothing tangible to give back in return. The Keiths of the world won't be coming to church writing big cheques as thanks, chairing committees, making visits, organizing events and other things besides. But the Keiths of the world offer us something else that is equally important. And this brings me to my second point about call and vision for the church. We have to do what we do and give what we give for the right reasons. We have to discover a joy and fulfillment in a way that is not about what advantage we'll get for ourselves in terms of tangible material benefits, self-promotion, recognition, advancement or popularity with the right crowd of people. None of that can the Keiths of the world offer us. But they can offer us something else – a purity of motivation for doing what we do. When I get no thank you from Keith, nor recognition or acknowledgement other than his joy of chomping into that bagel and slurpy satisfaction gulping down that coffee, and when that starts to give me real joy, then I know that I'm receiving spiritual fulfillment that has nothing to do with what the world can offer me. It's about my heart and soul being awakened and nourished, not my social standing or bank account. When I get addicted to that kind of fulfillment, I have tapped into the vision of Jesus offering good news, freedom, healing and hope to those who need it most. That's where we need to find our joy and fulfillment in being church.

But here's the thing: who will be drawn into church by this kind of vision? In our gospel reading we read that after Jesus says this about himself and his vocation, the important people, the people with a voice and means, are not responsive or interested. And so, Jesus says this: “ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah the prophet when he was in need, but he was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” In other words, even as there is crying need for good news, freedom, healing and hope for all of us whether we're Keith or Harris, it's only a minority who will recognize their need and be drawn into the fellowship of Jesus. Whether its because I'm too busy with life and with building my social profile, my friends, my career or my fun or whether it's because I'm too locked inside my issues and my problems to reach out beyond myself, I won't be in church. If we're looking for large numbers for success and majority recognition, we're in the wrong place being in the church

of Jesus Christ in this day and age in urban Canada. The images for his fellowship Jesus uses most in the gospels are images like a little yeast, salt, little lights in dark places, and little flocks amidst a world of mega-herds. The church may have been big and powerful as Christendom in history, and some of you who have been in church for over a generation will remember a time when... but we are now living post-Christendom, much closer to what it was like for the church of the New Testament. Big and wealthy, popular and secure are not attributes Jesus uses for the kingdom of God movement he wants to inspire as Messiah. It's about being authentic and real, and nothing makes us more authentic and real like living closer to the bone of our vulnerability.

Our vision for church must be to offer good news, freedom, healing and hope to those who recognize their need for it and for those of us who discover a joy and fulfillment like no other in being a part of it... and it will not be the majority. We better get used to that.

Finally, our epistle reading from Corinthians offers us a beautiful image of church. Out there in the world we are constantly being measured by how successful we are, how beautiful we are, how popular we are, how much money we have, whether we're on top of our game or out of the game. In church, as members of the body where Jesus Christ is our head and heart, we learn to live by a different vision and a different standard. Would Keith be welcome among us? Would he be treated, welcomed, loved, supported and embraced like everyone else? And would we find real joy and fulfillment in being givers of such love as much as receivers? That's what church can be and do for us and the world. It may be only a trickle of people out there who will come to realize how much they need the kind of good news, freedom, healing and hope we've got to offer here. And we may feel like we're the odd person out there in our workplace or neighbourhood who value being part of a fellowship like church. But seeing that massive grin on Keith's face as he takes in the feast before him and the joyous smiles and compassionate warmth surrounding him... in my mind, that's what the kingdom of God is all about. Is there any better place to be a part of? What's your vision of church? What's your vision of life? What do you need most? Amen.