

DOING CHURCH: THEN AND NOW

You may not know that the great Indian leader, Mohandas Gandhi, spent some of his early years working as a lawyer in South Africa. Indeed, many Indians settled there in the last century. In the days of apartheid, the legal segregation system in South Africa, people were divided into one of four groups, white, black, colored (those of mixed racial backgrounds) and Asian. Blacks, coloreds and Asians were largely prohibited from intermingling with whites.

In those early years, Gandhi was very intrigued by the teachings of Jesus. In particular, he thought the Beatitudes might provide a way out of the caste system that so dominated his home country of India. So he decided to go to church, to learn more about Jesus and his way of life.

When he got to the front of the church, however, he was stopped at the door. He explained why he was there, at which point the usher informed him that if her wanted to go to services there was a church for blacks down the road where he would be allowed to attend.

Gandhi never tried to attended Christian services again. "I like your Christ," he wrote later, "I do not like your Christians. [They] are so unlike Christ." (Quoted by M. Scandrette, *Soul Graffiti*, 16)

Apparently his words ring true for many. In researching this sermon, I discovered a website where you can buy bumper stickers emblazoned with those exact words. Unfortunately, many people are leery of Christians. Even some Christians themselves!

When we were working on our church vision statement five years ago, we very intentionally chose the words "A Community of Christ" instead of "A Christian Community." For some members of the Vision team, the word Christian was just too loaded.

And as uneasy as some folks are about Christians, I suspect the idea of church is even more unsettling. Recent scandals in Catholicism, various high-profile preachers getting exposed for their hypocrisy, church pronouncements against gays, controversies over race, and a wide array of issues have certainly soured some people when it comes to the church.

Pastor Mark Scandrette, in his delightfully titled book, *Soul Graffiti*, writes, "Many of us, understandably, are suspicious of organized religion. Calling to mind the inquisitions, religious wars, and slavery justified by scriptures, we may often feel that religion is a problem—not the solution to our deepest longings as people. . . . And we wonder whether it was every Jesus' intention to found a religion at all." (23)

Recently, in a conversation with someone from the wider community, I heard one of our members say, “One of the reasons I like Saugatuck is that it’s not too churchy.” Later the member worried that I might have felt insulted by his statement. I didn’t. It was just his way of saying he doesn’t want to be part of an organization that fits some of the stereotypes of church. He doesn’t want to be seen as someone who is part of an exclusivistic, judgmental or homophobic community. And that is how many view the Christian church.

It is, however, that very stereotype that Saugatuck, indeed all churches, must overcome. For such stereotypes, ultimately, threaten the very future of this or any church. But, if we will only remember the lessons of Pentecost, we will move in the right direction. Our text from Acts is all about the first Pentecost. So let me explain.

During his lifetime Jesus had created a very intentional community. He had drawn together a very diverse group. His closest followers included a tax collector, who worked for the Roman government, and a revolutionary who plotted against it. There were poor working class fishermen, and the wives of wealthy merchants. Some were overtly religious, others marginal members of the faith in terms of their piety. What held them together, what made them a community, was their common loyalty to Jesus. They were bound together not by common interest, not by common beliefs, not by common lifestyles, not even by common values. Rather, what held them together was their common love for Jesus and their desire to follow his way of life. And it was that love that made it possible for them to love each other—despite their differences. Whatever you do to my brothers and sisters, he told them in many different ways, you do to me. They were truly, a community of Christ. Brought together, and bound together, by Jesus.

But then things began to fall apart. Jesus got in trouble with the religious authorities. He was arrested and put on trial. He was condemned to death by the Romans, and executed. And suddenly, the One who had held them together was gone.

Three days later, they had encounters with the Resurrected Jesus, but in a few weeks time, those stopped as well. And so, fifty days later, they found themselves huddled together in the upper room. And they were frightened. They were afraid of the religious authorities. They were afraid of the Roman officials. And, at some deep level, they were most likely concerned that their fragile little community was on the verge of breaking up. Certainly, it would be safer for them to each go their own way, to resume their old jobs, go back to their old identities.

But Jesus had told them to stay in Jerusalem—to gather at least one more time. “I am sending upon you what [God] promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49)

So they waited. They worried. They shivered with fear. But they also nurtured a tiny spark of hope. When suddenly it happened. Suddenly they all experienced the presence of Christ's Holy Spirit. It was as if he were once again standing in their midst. As Eugene Peterson translates: "Without warning, there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. Then, like wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks." (*The Message*, 1969) Suddenly, a tattered, battered and despairing group of women and men was drawn back together, pulled from the brink into the very heart of it all. Instead of a discouraged group of individuals, each one hanging on to his or her own existential corner of grief and fear, they became, once again, a community, a community of Christ.

And what did they do? Immediately, they went out into the streets proclaiming the love of God in a flurry of languages! They quite literally, went out and "welcomed all people"! And then, after the hubbub of Pentecost settled down a bit, after some 3000 new folks had been brought into the fold, they took up the work of being the church. Later in Acts we read that they prayed together, ate together, studied together, distributed food and other goods to those who had need, offered healing and encouragement to all. They went about the business, if you will, of "learning to love and serve, God and neighbor." They went about the task of being disciples, students, of Jesus, learning and following his way of life.

Sisters and brothers that is what we have said we are called to be: "A Community of Christ. Welcoming All People. Learning to Love and Serve, God and Neighbor." That is what we as a congregation have declared to be our understanding of God's vision for our church. It's in our bulletin every Sunday. It's on our new brochure. It's on the home page of our website. And it is a powerful, biblically rooted vision of the church.

But note it all starts with being a community of Christ, not a community of do-gooders, though we are, not a community of nice people, though we are that as well—at least most days! Not a community of liberals or conservatives. Or even like-minded folks. No we are called to be an unlikely community. One that models for the world how different folks can get along. One that holds up a vision for the world of how rich folks and poor folks, gays and straights, young people and old, black, white and brown folks, Republicans and Democrats, can all share the same pew, the same building, the same space on this precious planet. We are called to be a community that is held together NOT because of our similarities, but rather because of the love of God shown to us in and through Jesus of Nazareth. We are called to be a community made possible by the Spirit of Christ. And that Spirit is one that is made manifest in our loving others enough to place their needs ahead of our own.

And that sisters and brothers, is so very counter cultural. The dominant culture says, "Get what you need—what you want. Put yourself first." But the church of Jesus Christ is called to put others first. Michael Craven, in a very insightful blog, writes that the church must

demonstrate “the reign of God within a distinct community. Because . . . ‘Before the church is called to do or say anything, it is called to be a unique community of those who live under the reign of God.’ [And] in a radically individualistic America, this may be the church’s greatest [challenge].” (www.crosswalk.com/blogs/mCraven)

And we demonstrate God’s reign by living for the other. By loving one another in word and deed, not because we like each other, but rather because Jesus calls us to do so. As Craven writes: “This community, the church, is intended to bear testimony to the restoration of fellowship with God and each other—a community of self-sacrificing love and support that stands in stark contrast to the . . . world.” (Ibid)

After Pentecost, the church grew very rapidly. In a matter of only three hundred years or so, it went from being a tiny group in Jerusalem, to being literally hundreds of thousands of Christians scattered across the Roman Empire. And why did the church grow? Was it great music? Good preaching? A superior youth program? A shiny new building? Not at all. While these things may indeed be important, what really attracted others to the way of Jesus, what drew others into the church, was the fact that those early Christians demonstrated what it meant to be a community of love and self-sacrificing service. History tells us that the most common reaction to the church in those days was not one of dismay, like Gandhi’s in South Africa, but rather one of amazement. Over and over folks would say of Christians, “My, how they love one another.”

Friends, I mourn the fact that the words Christian and church have lost much of their power to convey the good news of God’s love. I mourn the fact that for some the church is seen as an oppressive body and for others not much more than a social club always asking for money.

But there is a way to redeem the words, there is a way to restore their luster. But it is a way that calls on us to be willing to live even more fully, more deeply, into God’s reign, into Jesus’ way of love.

For we will not make a church that attracts others to God and to this congregation on our own. We will only be able to do that if we trust even more fully in God’s love and demonstrate that in our love for each other, and for our world. We will only be able to do that if we live out our vision to be a community of Christ.

On this Pentecost Sunday, on this birthday of the church, I can think of no better way to celebrate, than to recommit ourselves to our vision, for in the end, it is God’s vision. Might folks be heard to say on the streets of Westport, “My, how those folks from Saugatuck love each other.” Amen

John H. Danner

