

Sermon Series on the Church – May 2010 – 4 Weeks

JIM SHORT

Ladner United Church – 0900 and 1100hrs

May 2 – Sunday 2010

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Sermon 1 – Introduction to the Concept of Church

++++++ SCRIPTURE LESSON for Sunday May 2nd, 2010

The Book of Revelation was written in "code" as means of encouraging the early Christian Church living in tough times under the persecution of the Roman Empire.

Through careful examination, we know the circumstances faced by the Christians fits best into the period of the Flavian emperors, Vespasian and his sons, Titus and Domitian.

This was a time when the imperial cult flourished and the Emperor was understood to be a son of god.

Through many challenges, temptations and hardship, the Book of Revelation encourages the members of the young Christian Church to remain faithful to the mission and ministry of God as they experienced it in Jesus Christ.

Many Hebrew scripture references color this vision – the creation, the city, the bride - in John's vision of the whole of creation redeemed and renewed.

Perhaps the most important insight of the passage is that "now God's dwelling is among mortals."

This reaffirms God's coming into the world in Jesus Christ for the single purpose of redeeming the world and reconciling humanity and all creation to God's original purpose. **(Pause)**

Reading from the Book of Revelation chapter 21, verses 1 to 6. **(PAUSE)**

21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

21:2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

21:3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;

21:4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

21:5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."

21:6 Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

This ends the first lesson.

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Our gospel lesson takes us back to the events just before Jesus’ death and resurrection.

John has just ended his recounting of the Last Supper.
Judas had left on his nefarious errand to betray Jesus.

So Jesus told his remaining disciples about his glorification, by which he meant his forthcoming death on the cross.

This was a theme John had emphasized from the very beginning of his gospel. To John, Jesus’ death was a sacrificial offering to God worthy of God’s holiness and love reflected in the love of the disciples for each other. In this speech, Jesus defines for his disciples the form of the life they are to lead when he is gone.

A perceptive person once remarked that they found many illustrations used in sermons one way or the other simply repeated the same theme as the parable of the Good Samaritan: we are to love one another as we love ourselves. Perhaps this is not a bad thing. **(Pause)**

Reading from John’s Gospel, chapter 12, verses 31-35: **(pause)**

13:31 When he had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.

13:32 If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once.

13:33 Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, 'Where I am going, you cannot come.'

13:34 I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

13:35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Here ends the second lesson.

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Along with the scriptures, in preparation for the sermon time, please turn in your Voices United Hymn Books to page 918 and we will say together the words of the New Creed (give people time to find the reference in the hymn book)

Let us repeat together:

We are not alone, We live in God's world.

We believe in God: Who has created and is creating, Who has come in Jesus? The Word made flesh, To reconcile and make new,
Who works in us and others By the Spirit.

We trust in God. We are called to be the Church: To celebrate God's presence, To live with respect in Creation, To love and serve others, To seek justice and resist evil, To proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

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Prayer

May the meditations of our hearts and the words of my lips if they be your words be worthy and acceptable to you and may your word come to your people now either through me or despite me.

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(Video: Known by our love – The Work of the People)

That is not the church...yet for many people in the early 21st Century if you were to mention church to them...that is what they would immediately think about...

Diana Butler Bass in her recent book – [A People's History of the Church](#) relates an encounter with a friend over of dinner and how their conversation came around to Diana's personal faith.

Her friend said – "I don't understand how you can still be a Christian."

She replied – "I know it isn't the easy thing to be these days but I just can't get away from Jesus. I actually love Jesus and his teachings."

"Jesus?" Her friend questioned – "I don't have any trouble with Jesus. It's all the stuff that happened after Jesus that makes me mad."

Butler Bass goes on to say that – Jesus fascinates millions but Christianity the religion that began with Jesus leaves countless people cold.

What turns people cold she calls "Big C CHRISTIANITY?"

She calls it Big C Christianity – Christ, Constantine, Christendom, Calvin and the Christian West...

It is one particular strain of the Christian Story: but not the only one:

"Jesus came to earth to save us, but he founded the church instead. That church suffered under Roman persecution until the emperor Constantine made Christianity legal. With its new status, the Christian religions spread through Europe where popes and kings formed a society they called Christendom which was run by the Catholic church and was constantly threatened by Muslims, witches and heretics. There were wars and inquisitions. When people had had enough, they rebelled and became protestants their main leader being John Calvin who was a great theologian but also a killjoy. Eventually Calvin's heirs left Europe to set up a Christian society in the new world which became the most important part of the Christian world a beacon of faith and democracy.

Christianity is an us against them morality tale of a suffering church that is vindicated by God through its global victory over other worldviews, religions or political systems. Militant Christianity tolerates (and often encourages) schisms, crusades, inquisitions and warfare as means – metaphorical if not actual 0 to the righteous end of establishing God's will on earth..."

In a book by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons called [UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity](#) (2007). Through Barna consulting group – the authors conducted a three-year social scientific survey to see how 16 to 29 year olds viewed Christians.

What they discovered was large amounts of hostility, resentment and disdain. He suggested to church leaders that it would be a mistake to consider what he called "outsider outrage" against the church as a misperception as their research and anecdotes were based upon interviews with people who had experienced today's Christians.

According to Kinnaman's study, here are the percentages of people outside the church who think that the following words describe present-day Christianity:

- * anti-homosexual 91%
- * judgmental 87%
- * hypocritical 85%
- * old-fashioned 78%
- * too political 75%
- * out of touch with reality 72%
- * insensitive to others 70%
- * boring 68%

(Journey with Jesus – Back to Basics; Love one Another – April 26, 2010 – internet)

That's a pretty frightening thought – I was thinking well when I'm out and about believing myself to be living a relationship with Jesus in my life and living God's love – is this how people I might meet or be around or sitting amongst in a café really think about Jesus `church.

Last week I updated people on the Ladner United Church Building project...a began to cast a vision with you about the building being called something like a Center of Healing and Hospitality...

During the week as I was preparing for this Sunday – looking at the lessons/reading Bass's book – thinking about cultural perceptions – I decided – let's spend the next few weeks until Pentecost – May 23 – the birthday of the Church – exploring church...

So I propose that over the next few weeks together we will reflect together and with God about this wonderfully strange, at times seemingly antiquated body of Jesus called the church...

What is it?

How did we get it?

What is it to do and be in the 21st Century?

A focus for these next few weeks will be on part of what we call the New Creed – which we read together during the scripture reading time ... to help focus us especially the part focused on the church...

We are called to be the Church:

- To celebrate God's presence,
- To live with respect in Creation,
- To love and serve others,
- To seek justice and resist evil,
- To proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
- Our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

Over the years as we have thought and planned and prayed about the renewal and rebuilding of our church facility – we have always said we can't let the focus on the building prevent us from being the church...

If, God pray it never happens...our total facility burnt down one night and all that was left the next morning were water soaked ruins...we would not cease to be Ladner United Church – we would simply be a church without a building...

If we thought that way we would be wrong – but it would be understandable for so many people identify so strongly the church with the building and sometimes the care and upkeep of a building can get in the way of being church...

What the church is – follows from our concentration over these last months on the Core Stories of the Bible...

We ended that sermon and study series when we spoke about Jesus' resurrection...

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During our focus on the core stories of scripture the overall constant theme was the Creator God's reaching out, God's initiative, God's action to establish a covenant, a relationship of intimacy and trust with the world and the people of it...and how YHWH

Chose to dwell specifically with a particular people...

The people of Israel – created from the child bearing relationship of Abraham and Sarah

And choose them to be God's way of blessing the entire world and calling the world back into the covenantal relationship of love...

And though God lived everywhere – in fact the whole of the magnificent and created world was God's home

God also lived in a particular way with the people first of all in a portable tent of meeting...as the lesson from the book of Revelation says – God chose to dwell with mortals – to tabernacle with them...

That was taken down and set up depending on where the people where in their wilderness journey...

The tabernacle – which housed the Ark of the Covenant – the container which held within them the stone tablets – the laws – we could call it the first bible...a kind of holy 5th wheel trailer

Which Moses brought down from his trip up Mt Sinai to converse with God?

When the people of Israel reached the Promised Land...

About 950 years before the birth of Christ – King Salmon build the magnificent new and permanent home of God – the Temple...

Whose ruined foundations are still to be found in Jerusalem...

The word translated into English which we call "church" is in Greek – ecclesia...

Which means an assembly, a congregation, a gathering...

Where or when ever the people of God gather together – they are gathered as "church"...

And the church is not some human's brain child or good idea – as the creed suggests –

We are called to be the church – God calls us – extension of that covenantal outreach of the Creator God

If you gave the average person the task of figuring out how many churches there are in South Delta...

They would probably get the answer by counting church building...but they would be wrong...

Wherever – the scripture says – two or three people gather together in Jesus' name...

They are "church" and so taking that definition – there could be countless churches in South Delta – meeting in all kinds of places and spaces...

The first "church" – our parent so to speak – was the disciples of Jesus

Those men and women, who travelled with him, were trained by him, spoke with him, listened to him and made that last journey to Jerusalem with him and in some cases ran away...

It was those men and women – women to who Jesus appeared to after his resurrection when the women came to the tomb expecting to find a decaying body and found a living person...

And the one who appeared in Galilee and other places – according to the writers of the Gospel...

To the disciples – and breathed his spirit upon them and commissioned them simply...

He commissioned them to continue on his behalf – the work of God that Jesus had understood

To be his calling...

And so the first church was this very average ordinary group of men and women...

Who filled with the Spirit

Began travelling all around the world spreading the message of who Jesus was

Living as Jesus had invited them to live...come hear the good news – hear about Jesus – Jesus brings life – join us as together we relate to him – read the stories, pray – go about his work...

John recounts this morning in his gospel one of those stories and moments so familiar

In each of the gospels...

When Jesus – sitting with his disciples after the Last Supper – what we call Communion...the yearly Passover meal that all Jewish people participated in...

In Jerusalem

He has washed his disciple's feet as a way of demonstrating the meaning of love and service...

And he speaks to them about his way of life in a long monologue passage we sometimes refer to as the farewell discourses...

And he gives them the new (not really new) but renewed commandment...

Which will be the focus of their life after his resurrection...

Love one another as I have loved you...

So the church – the gathered people of God....the ecclesia...

Becomes for Christian the ultimate extension expression of the covenantal love of God which finds its climax in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus

We are part of the history of that movement

To Ladner to now – we heard the message

On this corner...

As the creed says – we are called to be the church...

Just imagine for a moment...the genealogy

We just didn't decide one day – this group of us to have a church

110 years ago when the sanctuary was built – someone did not invent this and say – hey let's create this thing called church

There is a chain – of relationships that go back from you and me through countless people and relationships...who knows how it exactly happened...

But somehow from that group of early disciples – who spread the message as the first church – it got to us here and now and we continue it...

And to continue to spread the message...

And each of us choose to respond to someone sharing the message with us and we become part of the ecclesia the gathered people, the assembly

We are called by God to be the church...

So here is what the church is not

It's not an another institution or club or fraternity or group to belong to that

It's not a building or a museum or a heritage site

It's not a society of perfect saints who are better morally than others with narrow doors demanding that everyone be and believe the same thing so that they can be in the in group and no the out group

It is not a group of good people harboring themselves from the evils of the world waiting to be raptured to heaven.

It is not a Costco for individual spiritual practices for us to consume – if you remember my slide from last week – sit and soak churches create spiritual couch potatoes...

Rather it is a community where Jesus lives and relating to him makes our souls and spirits soar...

Or it is - as Paul says –

Using the metaphor of a human body – with Jesus as its head

Giving it direction, guidance, energy, life, co-ordination

The body of Jesus in the world loving the world loving people into the image of God their creator...

Author who wrote – Church is not (Christianity for the Rest of Us – Bass – page 7)

“Not rocket science...You preach the gospel, you offer hospitality and pay attention to worship and people’s spiritual lives. Frankly you take Christianity seriously as a way of life.”

Offer another image – a hospital for the sin sick soul...

You may have heard in the news this week of St. Paul’s Hospital plans to offer a safe haven for troubled moms who want to abandon their new born babies anonymously...

According to St. Paul's Hospital staff, a so-called angel's cradle will be set up in a private area accessible from just outside the entrance of the downtown hospital's emergency room on Burrard Street, as well as from inside the emergency room itself.

The facility, which opens on Monday, will allow a mother to put a baby in the bassinet and leave before hospital staff are notified by an alarm with a 30-second delay, according to a statement released by the hospital on Thursday morning.

The baby would then be given any necessary treatment by hospital staff before being turned over to the Ministry of Children and Family Development for long-term care.

A concept that dates back to the 12th Century when the church had baby hatches installed in some church buildings and were popular across Europe – phased out in the early 20th Century and then re-instated in several countries around the world since the 1950’s...

That’s a lovely image to understand the church – an angel’s cradle...

A community for sin sick souls...a gathering or a place where hospitality knows no bounds, where the door to welcome is wide...and the unconditional grace and love of God as experienced in Jesus Christ pulses, lives and breathes....

Sources:

Diana Butler Bass – A People’s History of Christianity

Diana Butler Bass – Christianity for the Rest of Us

Simply Christian by NT Wright

Jesus 7/24 – David Bruce

