
Some Assembly Required
Wesley Mimico United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 1:6-14

You know, there are a couple of scriptures that really make me wonder why anyone would want to be a Christian. One of the classics is Galatians 2:20, where St. Paul says that we have to be crucified with Christ. Now that just does not sound good. But the other reading I would think would discourage people from becoming Christian is the text we just read from Acts.

Jesus promises the coming of the kingdom of God, but then he leaves the scene. Jesus promises the kingdom, but then he leaves it up to us - with the help of the spirit - to actually do the work. I mean - what is the point of being Christian if Jesus just leaves us to solve our own problems and to do all the leg work ourselves? What is the point of being Christian if we still have to think for ourselves? What indeed!

But seriously, our text reminds me of those tee shirts that say something like - "my parents went to the Bahamas and all I got was this stupid shirt". It's a bit like someone asking for a picnic table and being given a tree trunk. The ingredients are there, but perhaps the recipient of the tree trunk doesn't want to make the effort - or doesn't know how - to turn a tree trunk into a picnic table.

Jesus had promised to bring the kingdom - and then he left. Or, in the words from Acts, the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" ... and in answer to that - Jesus departs. Why does it seem that Jesus does not finish the job that he started? What sort of messiah is Jesus anyway?

I suppose it depends on who exactly you think Jesus is. Or who you think Jesus was going to be. Or who you think the long-awaited-for messiah should be. It depends on what sort of "salvation" you are looking for. The disciples, in spite of having lived with Jesus and being a part of his ministry for 3 years were still hoping that Jesus would be a military messiah, one who would come and put the Romans in their place with force. But

Jesus is not that sort of messiah.

But what other models / images are there for Jesus anyway. At this point you might expect me to invite you to open your minds and hearts. Sorry. Instead, I invite you to open your wallets. No, I don't want your money. Here - I'll show you.

[descend and discuss the gods of the wallet]

Wallet gods:

- credit card - instant gratification
- library card - membership and privileges - are you pre-approved
- scuba card - membership, but with training, skills
- points card - do we save up points with Jesus to be redeemed?
- presto card - if I keep paying, I keep playing.
- family photo - a memento of a good feeling in the past?

What sort of God are you looking for? Is your God anything like any of the cards in your wallet? Or, are you looking for something else.

This week was the Annual Meeting of Toronto Conference, which Karen and I both attended. Friday and Saturday were days packed full of conversation, laughter, joys, tears, and struggles. The days are intended to be business meetings with some educational pieces, but I always find them to be much more than that. We come together. We laugh together. We cry together. We eat together. We share together. We learn together. Business is done and friendships are built.

I am struck by different things at conference. One highlight for me is watching as the candidates for ordination make their 90 second speeches. And I am reminded of how I was standing there myself only 2 years ago. So now it's my turn to pontificate about how the educational standards of new ministers are slipping.

Today, I was having a conversation with a minister who was describing some

problems he was having with his pastoral charge. Apparently, he was not allowed to set his own office hours, or his holiday schedule. He was (these are his words) told how to do his job and then blamed when things did not turn out well enough. I listened carefully, and pastorally, of course.

But it reminded me that I need to share with you how delighted I am that we have such a good working relationship. Between M+P, and Larry, the worship committee, council and others, I have always felt I was given the latitude to discern and execute my job on terms that serve both myself and you. Hearing the story from this one minister reminded me of how grateful I am for our relationship. Thank you!

I attended a poetry-writing session led by Deb MacMillan, a well-loved intern from this congregation. I walked around a very poor part of Bramalea and learned about some of the outreach programming in the area. We learned about the results - thus far - of the comprehensive review that aims to restructure our denomination over time starting after 2015.

There was business to do too. Some business flowed smoothly and was easy to handle. Some business was not so fluid. One interesting item was a motion about increasing the diversity of the membership of the Toronto Conference Executive. The conversation took a long time. But actually, everyone supported the idea of more diversity, but we disagreed as to the most appropriate mechanism. The most challenging motions, as usual, involved Palestine-Israel. But we did vote to press our government to request that the Israeli government opens an investigation around violations to the Geneva convention carried out by the Israel Defence Forces against Palestinian children.

Our scripture this week fits beautifully with the meeting of Toronto conference because both the scripture and conference itself are reminders that Christianity and the church itself are projects with “some assembly required”. In Acts, Jesus does not build the church or the kingdom of God for the disciples - they were instead invited to participate in that. And at Toronto Conference, we are given our annual reminder that there is no “church” out there that should act the way we want it to - there is only us! We

have to do the work ourselves. Every year at Conference I just wait for someone to say, “you know, Conference should do ...”, and I always say, “that’s a wonderful idea, do you want any help with that?”

If you ever wonder if the church is a “some assembly required” project, attend Toronto Conference. Because there you will find faithful caring people. You will find active, resourceful people. You will find lethargic and tired people. You will find incompetent people. You will find wonderful people. And you will find out that these are all the same people. You may even discover that you are one of those people! We - as a church - are definitely a work in progress. But really, would we want it any other way?

Jesus did not leave us the perfect world. Jesus did not leave us with the kingdom of God in final form. Jesus gave us the vision, and God sends the spirit. The rest is up to us.

We have the tools. We have the materials. The kingdom of God is here on earth. Right now. Some assembly required.

Amen.