
Jesus gave us the church: some assembly required
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 1:1-11 and Luke 24:36-43, 50-53

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 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 up and leaves. Jesus promises us 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 is we still have to think for ourselves?

Christian tradition tells us that Jesus gave us the church. But there are 2 problems with that traditional understanding. For one thing, Jesus never stopped being Jewish, and did not become Christian. But more importantly, we've just read the crucial story where the real action happens. And there isn't much action. Jesus didn't so much leave the disciples with the church, Jesus just leaves the disciples - period. Both Luke and Acts describe Jesus promising to send the spirit - which is great. But instead of Jesus hanging around to be part of the welcoming committee, Jesus just legs it. Which probably in part explains why there are so many different churches, so many different ideas of what Christian living should look like, so many different flavours of Christianity. If Jesus had actually created the church before he headed to heaven, we might have a lot more uniformity within Christianity, whereas today in fact we have very little. Globally, there is very little that all Christian groups agree on.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying whether Jesus being a little more proactive would have given us a better church or not. I'm just trying to figure out what actually happened based on the writings in the Bible. And the simple reality is that Jesus did not leave us the church. Jesus left us with some helpful teachings, the spirit, and the

ultimate DIY project. Saying that Jesus left us the church is like handing someone an egg and some wheat and saying that you have given them a chicken sandwich. The ingredients are there, but there is a little bit of work required. Some assembly required.

But there is at least one other possibility. What if Jesus did in fact leave the blueprints for a church (not as a Christian entity of course) but the disciples just didn't understand it. In the gospel of Mark - for example - the disciples consistently fail to get the point that Jesus is trying to make. What if Jesus tried to leave a blueprint but it was just not understood or appreciated in the moment because his ideas were just too radical.

During Jesus's ministry, he said a lot of things that were fairly conventional. But I would argue that Jesus's big contribution to humanity was his vision that we are commanded by God to love each other. Well, even that is conventional if you understand it to mean love the people who are basically just like you. The radical part was Jesus's call for us to love everyone - including our enemies. That was truly radical. That still is truly radical today.

I suspect that the disciples didn't get that particular point. Because Jewish expectation 2000 years ago was that the messiah would come with military force and defeat the Roman empire. 2000 years ago, for Jewish people, salvation meant salvation of the Jewish people as a group. Salvation was understood to be a corporate thing. Given the strong feelings of Jewish exceptionalism 2000 years ago, it's hard to believe that the disciples could possibly have understood such radical love. But in Christianity, salvation became a personal thing. Loving your enemy not only brought freedom and new life to your enemy, it also brought freedom and new life to you. Because reaching out in love helps the other person, but at the same time it allows us to find healing. Now that is radical! And I think I can see how the disciples missed that, because people today continue to miss that point.

So on balance, I'm actually glad that Jesus did not leave us the church as a finished project, because then it would have been stuck in the cultural context of 2000 years ago. DIY sounds like a lot of work, but at least we get to create the church that makes sense today, in our own context.

Besides, we don't know how Jesus would have reacted to our current COVID-19

pandemic. The Internet has a few suggestions on what that might have looked like.

[slide: last supper zoom]

For example, here's a depiction of the last supper held as a Zoom meeting. And of course we have that great theological questions - when Jesus said "follow me", did he mean on Twitter or on Instagram?

But frivolous jokes aside, it truly is a gift that we - that's you and me - get to imagine and then create the church that we need in 2020 in Brantford. But you know, we have always worked for that. Our ancestors have always worked for that. For 2000 years Christians have been recreating the church to make sense in their own context.

[slide: sacred fire]

Here's an example from 1 year ago. Before I came to Brantford, I was part of Toronto Conference / Shining Waters Regional Council. Last year, the annual regional meeting of Shining Waters Regional Council was held in Barrie. I was on the regional executive until the region cast its new executive at that inaugural meeting. I was also one of the chaplains. I also helped manage their labyrinth. I also hosted a round-table discussion on "Compassionate Living though Veganism".

At the meeting, we had a number of representatives from local indigenous communities, including an indigenous person who is also an ordained minister that I shared classes with at Emmanuel College. And I have to say that I was really impressed with the indigenous engagement. I look forward to seeing how indigenous engagement works here in Horseshoe Falls Regional Council. But in the past sometimes that engagement is a bit lame. But this time was wonderful - they hosted a "Sacred Fire" right at Georgian College where the AGM was held. In fact, we chose Georgian College as a venue in part because they had assured us that having a Sacred Fire there was possible, and that they had done it before.

But 2 days before the AGM, we were informed that actually, no, there could not be a Sacred Fire on site, and also that we could not arrange a fire permit somewhere else in time either. Georgian College did have a prepared site for a flame, but it turned out to be a gas burner. Even worse, there were strict instructions that nothing could be burned in the flame, not even sage grass or tobacco, which are pretty much essential requirements

at a Sacred Fire. Moreover, the image that most of us have of a Sacred Fire ceremony is in some secluded spot in the middle of a forest, or perhaps on the shore of a lake. The ritual of Sacred Fire isn't just about having a flame, it's about the setting too. But this gas burner was located 50 m from a really busy road and a bit over 100 m from the 400 highway. Instead of hearing the crackle of the flames, and the sounds of wildlife all around us, we were instead treated to the sounds of the freeway. I pointed out to my friend that the freeway is like a river because highways today are transportation routes, like rivers used to be. She had the good grace to laugh.

But in spite of all the problems, the indigenous community persevered and did a wonderful job presenting their teachings in spite of the very inappropriate site and location. Being on the Regional Executive I knew all about the problems and solutions, but when it came to sharing their teachings they did a good job of making the best of it. Their leader only slipped once, referring to the gas burner as a "Sacred Appliance" instead of a "Sacred Fire", but she was very sleep-deprived at that point. When the time came to extinguish the flames, a person knelt down and shut off the gas valve. It did not look very authentic. But it felt very authentic because of the gracious way that the teachings had been handled. As I said, overall I was very impressed.

[slide: stained glass]

The other story I want to share is from the Middle Ages. But I need to teleport to the sanctuary for that story.

This story is from the middle ages, but I will begin the story in the present by saying that I really love stained-glass windows in churches. I'm drawn to the bright colours, and to the warmth - literal warmth on a sunny day - that stained-glass brings to a sanctuary. Stained-glass is actually an ancient technology, used by many cultures including Egyptian, Roman, Assyrian, and a number of Asian cultures. However, stained-glass entered the life of the church in a big way during the Middle Ages.

Most of us see stained-glass windows as an art form, but in the Middle Ages, stained-glass windows were the church's response to a crisis. It's hard for me to even believe this but as we all know, until at least the 19th century, most of the world's people were illiterate. And the way I like to tell this part of history is that the church asked the

question, “How do we share the good news with people who are illiterate?” And one of the answers to that question was using stained-glass windows that depict important biblical and church stories visually. Stained-glass windows in churches were a form of communication - in response to a crisis.

And today as we face our own crisis with the pandemic, we ask a similar question which is, “How do we share the good news with people who are isolated?” And just like the crisis during the Middle Ages, the answer involves finding a new way to communicate the good news and keep people connected. Today the church asks the question, “How do we share the good news with people who are isolated?” and one of the answers to that question is to use computer networks, computers, tablets, cellphones and landlines as a method of communication. Our use of modern technology in church is actually just an adaptation from the Middle Ages. Stained-glass windows are just the precursor of youtube videos. Or perhaps I should say that youtube videos are just stained-glass windows that have motion and sound. It’s just communication after all.

I’m almost done that story, but I simply cannot resist pointing out the other similarity between computer technology and stained-glass windows. They are both made of sand. Because both glass and computer chips are made from quartz sand. Do you think God has a sense of humour?

[slide: computer chip and stained glass]

Today, we need to reimagine our church in the context of COVID-19. But we should draw strength from the fact that throughout Christian history, the church has found ways to adapt to crisis. I will agree that our current changes feel new. But the need to change should feel familiar. We just need to keep in mind the question, “How do we share the good news with people who are isolated?” and see where that question takes us. If an indigenous community can effectively share their teachings around a “Sacred Appliance”, it gives me hope that we will figure out how to stay connected with each other too.

We still care about each other. We still care about other people. We still care about our wider community. We still are the church. Some assembly required.

Amen.