

Seeing the Light In Others

What do you think church is? At the congregational retreat last October, I invited the participants to complete the sentence 'Church is...' I hope that I have permission to share the answers with you because they all are very good answers. Church is.... "Family, Us, Joy, Warmth, Fun, Music, Worship, Church family, Why I can't sleep in on Sunday, The people in it, The busiest time of the week, My family – a place where I find spiritual nourishment and comfort and support in time of need, A spiritual family and a place to get spiritual nourishment, Fellowship, Where we worship God, Living traditions, Family, Another family, Music, A place for me to be comfortably "me", Food, Community, (Sometimes) a duty, Sunday morning". Do the answers resonate with you?

All of the answers relate not to a building but to people – more precisely not just a gathering of individuals who have faith, but a community of faith like a family who share their life, faith, love, time and food together with each other. You are called to be the church, like the disciples who were called by Jesus as individuals but lived as a family. Like most families, it was not easy for the disciples to live in harmony with each other as we can see in the famous argument in the Gospels about which of the disciples is the greatest. Maybe when each disciple decided to follow Jesus, they were not focused as much on living communally as they were on following their Lord. They had to learn how to live with one another harmoniously throughout Jesus' life and ministry and even after his ascension.

It has been and will always be an important task for the church to be united in Christ, as he prayed for unity of his followers in John 17:21, "I want all of them to be one with each other, just as I am one with you and you are one with me. I also want them to be one with us. Then the people of this world will believe that you sent me." Notice the last sentence: that the people of this world will believe that God sent Jesus if we Christians become one with each other in God.

As we celebrate our church's 120th anniversary, I also want us to celebrate the living heritage, tradition and faith of the United Church of Canada. I believe that the United Church of Canada strives to unite believers in the Spirit, and works to make Jesus' prayer come true. I know

there is no perfect community or denomination under heaven, but I think we need to recognize and celebrate our gifts and our strengths, and we need to reclaim the spirit that makes us truly a united and uniting church.

The passage from Matthew 5:13 – 20 is one of most famous proclamations from Jesus. He said “You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world”. In this simple and short sentence, I found a very powerful and radical invitation for us to change. Traditionally, this passage has been interpreted like this: ‘we, Christians are the salt of the earth and the light of the world so we need to make an effort to affect the world around us. If we are too much like the world, we are worthless. Christians should not blend in with everyone else. Instead, we should affect others positively, just as seasoning brings out the best flavour in food.’ Well, that sounds good but a bit aggressive.

I want to tell you the other side of the story. In English you can be either plural or singular, but here the “you” is plural. Jesus was not talking to individuals but addressing the entire crowd of people. They were not Christians or churchgoers; the term, “Christian” was mentioned only three times in the Bible and the first mention is in Acts, a few years after Jesus’ ascension. Those who surrounded Jesus on the mountain were just ordinary people including the poor and the sick. They must have been surprised to hear that they *all* are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. They had to know that ‘I am salt and light’, and at the same time they had to admit that being salt and light is not a singular gift – everyone here is salt and light.

What they experienced from Jesus was not only encouraging and empowering but also shocking and challenging. Some of them probably did not resemble valuable salt or radiant light; how could the poor, the sick and the weak shine their light before others? Yet, Jesus saw the salt and the light in every person in the crowd regardless of their wealth, personality, health, age, gender and even their theology. So he invited them to look at the light in themselves and the light in others; to look with God’s eyes at their own value.

If all Christians thought that the whole people of God are salt and light, it would make a huge difference to the world, because it allows them to engage not only in shining their light but also in recognizing the light in others, and in helping others to shine their light to the world. Let us remember from now on that every person we meet is the salt and the light, let our perception and words reflect that new understanding, and see what will happen to us and them. Let us see the light in everyone in our congregation, and help the light shine to you and to the world.

At the Bible study on Tuesday morning, we talked about Matthew 5:16 “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” And we named some of the good works that our church is doing. Here are some examples: Food bank, coffee house, Sunday school and small group ministry. I’d like us to recognize those who have shared their gifts and time freely and namelessly. And I’d like us to recognize those who have not shared yet but are ready to share their gifts.

I’d like to conclude with 1 Corinthians 12:21-26 to help us to appreciate everyone’s gift to be a more faithful and healthier church.

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.”