

3Advent B 17

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126 (OR Luke 1:47-55)

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

What if John wasn't calling to the bystanders?

When we hear this reading about the crazily dressed preacher down at the river we always imagine that he was calling the unfaithful, the unredeemed, the unchurched to a better life, to discipleship, to Christ. We imagine him surrounded by heathens who, filled with a sincere desire to amend their lives plunge into the water in a dramatic baptism.

It makes for a good message to this day. Especially today as more than ever we are well aware of the declining attendance at church, and increasing biblical illiteracy. We are surrounded by unchurched people and the church has been about converting people, "saving" people, for centuries. Echoing John's call the church has been asking the world to turnaround their lives, to turn and live wholly, turn and live faithfully, turn and live and know Christ.

And so we have. In the middle ages there was the famous Christian Crusades that went out and forcibly converted people to faith. There's been pulpit pounding sermons to drive the point home in stubborn hearts. Even here in Edmonton you can find preachers on the street corners ready and willing to tell you the consequences for all your misdeeds.

But, what if John wasn't calling to such "heathens?"

A few years ago I read an article that stuck with me by Bishop Mike Reinhart of the ELCA. In it Bishop Reinhart says: "The turnaround of the mainline churches will happen when we in

those churches care as much about those outside the church, as we do those inside.”

That’s an interesting statement and it is in agreement with our own Bishop, Larry Kochendorfer who has been calling us as a Synod to be an evangelizing church – to get the message out there. But, Bishop Reinhart says it’s actually about more than that, it’s about us. He says that the problem is, too often we get comfortable in our congregation we end up making decisions for ourselves rather than for those who are not in here yet. Let me share a bit more of how he describes this:

Decisions are made for the benefit of those inside rather than those outside the church. In every single decision, even the little ones, insiders trump outsiders. Take hymns, for example. Musical decisions are not made considering what will attract spiritually hungry outsiders, but what will please the card-carrying, bill-paying membership. Most church outsiders don’t care if you ever sing “How Great Thou Art.”

What do we do about it?

Change. Adapt. The church has adapted, survived and even thrived in times of tectonic change in the past. It can again.

But risk is risky, and change is simply too difficult and painful. Most organizations won’t change until they’re desperate, like the alcoholic that won’t go to rehab until s/he hits rock bottom.

So what will give us the courage to take those risks?

This is where John the Baptist comes in. Remember I asked the question: what if John wasn’t calling to the outsiders? What if he was calling to the “insiders,” to the faithful Jewish community and calling them to change, calling them to a new way that would include the Gentiles?

If we read this passage carefully we see this is what is happening. "This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem..." John is speaking to the *leaders* of the Jewish faith, the top dogs from Jerusalem! And his message to these successful, high-paid CEO's? "Make straight the way of the Lord." Get out of the way, make room for God to work! He is in fact calling them to repentance and to change their ways so as to no longer serve themselves and the system that supported them.

As we read John's message today we're inclined to imagine ourselves as a paving crew that has worked hard to make a smooth road for Christ but, in more ways than one we, like the Jewish leaders, succumb to self-serving ministry in the name of Jesus. John says it can't be this way. We must call one another, remind one another that it's not about us, it's about others.

This is a hard road folks but, there's no other way. One more time let me read Bishop Reinhart:

The world is hell-bent on destruction in countless ways. It is desperately in need of a church that offers a Way of peace, truth, compassion and hope, as opposed to the world's way of power, materialism, exploitation and violence. It needs leaders willing to risk comfort, status and economic security for the life of the world and the outreach potential of the church. It needs a church that looks less like the Pharisees' religion and more like Jesus' ministry. It needs a church that is willing to sacrifice everything for those outside: buildings, budgets, sacred cows, traditions, structures. It needs a church that so loves the world, that she'd be willing to die for it.

So here's the plan. New policy. Every decision, every single decision made by staff, council and every committee is made on behalf of those not yet here. Every sermon choice, every hymn, song and musical

choice, every building and grounds choice, every spending choice is made with outsiders in mind.

That's a radical call – if I were to meet Bishop Reinhart I'd almost expect to see him dressed in camel hair and smell of locust juice!

This is hard work because at times we are addicted to the way things are. We can get stuck in dreaming of how church can be better for us. But, it's not about you, it's not about me. It's about them, out there, the non-believers, the guy asking for money on a cardboard sign, the waitress at Smitty's, the atheists, the students in our schools, the lady who took your parking spot, the old man who can't remember your name. To change, to be a missional church, is a radical call but, not an impossible call.

We are so privileged to be here in church. We are so privileged to know that Jesus came into the world to save us, to walk with us, to bring hope and joy. Let's not stand in the way of Jesus' mission to the world. Let us *make straight the way of the Lord* right here in on 51st avenue. That tiny baby Jesus came for the whole world, as we give of our own lives, we give Christ.

Insiders and Outsiders

Posted on December 2, 2011 by Gulf Coast Synod

By Bishop Mike Rinehart

Here's my hunch. Everything for me rises or falls on this bet. I'm putting all my eggs in this basket:

The turnaround of the mainline churches will happen when we in those churches care as much about those outside the church, as we do those inside. To embrace relevance, we will have to let go of survival.

That's it. That's all I've got. If I'm wrong, fire me now. I'll die on this hill.

What does this mean?

My theory is that the mainline churches have ceased to be relevant to the culture, because insiders trump outsiders every time.

Decisions are made for the benefit of those inside rather than those outside the church. In every single decision, even the little ones, insiders trump outsiders. Take hymns, for example. Musical decisions are not made considering what will attract spiritually hungry outsiders, but what will please the card-carrying, bill-paying membership. Most church outsiders don't care if you ever sing "How Great Thou Art." They won't be slightly offended by a guitar in church. Time and time again church leaders receive heat from church insiders upset about this or that, because the insiders are trying to recreate their childhood church experience or simply have a rigid idea of what church is supposed to be. Church leaders cave in to these insiders because they try to control the purse strings.

More facts on the ground: insiders are inherently change-averse. People don't like change, especially those who have status in the church. Pete Steinke taught us that every church is an emotional system. Some people are benefitting from the system as it currently is. Some benefit emotionally. They are revered as church saints. Or they are validators to whom everyone turns for approval of decisions. They are having an emotional need met by receiving recognition. Or perhaps they are simply tirelessly defending The Tradition, regardless of how new or unhelpful that tradition may be. People in power, who have privileges in the current system, will resist change and make life really hard for any leader who seeks to be a change agent. Pastors are paid from members' giving, so there is a potential conflict of interest. If they do the right thing, some leaders will end up losing their job (or up on a cross, to reference an often-told story).

Why is this happening?

Church structures were set up to preserve what exists, not change it. These stable structures work well when society is changing slowly, imperceptibly. If something is working, protect it at all costs. But what if it is not working? What if the rate of societal change skyrockets, and old patterns and structures no longer work? Peter Drucker once said, "When the rate of change outside the organization exceeds the rate of change inside the organization, the organization is doomed."

What do we do about it?

Change. Adapt. The church has adapted, survived and even thrived in times of tectonic change in the past. It can again.

Stable structures are a high value in a stable culture, but when in a climate of rapid change, adaptability is the higher value. In a time of stability, experience is crucial. In times of change, experience can be a liability, especially if the experienced make the fatal mistake of assuming what garnered success in the past, will guarantee success in the future. What got you where you are now will not get you where you need to go in the future. Sorry. Leaders who don't get this are in for some rough sledding.

Let's face it, change is hard. Change, however is non-negotiable. The only constant in life is change. There is no growth without change. As someone once said, "The only one who likes change is a wet baby." Any kind of change creates conflict. Leaders can only tolerate so much discontent. And even a little discontent sounds LOUD when you're in the hot seat. So when things heat up, leaders circle the wagons, which is precisely the wrong thing to do. Instead, leaders need to sin boldly. Lead boldly. Look at any successful enterprise and you can be certain that someone, at some point, took a huge risk along the way. Nothing great is accomplished without risk.

"The trouble with Steve Jobs: Likes to make his own rules, whether the topic is computers, stock options, or even pancreatic cancer. The same traits that make him a great CEO drive him to put his company, and his investors, at risk."

—Fortune Magazine

But risk is risky, and change is simply too difficult and painful. Most organizations won't change until they're desperate, like the alcoholic that won't go to rehab until s/he hits rock bottom.

So what will give us the courage to take those risks?

This takes us back to the beginning. Churches will not adapt to the new realities until they care as much about reaching those outside, as appeasing those inside.

The world is hell-bent on destruction in countless ways. It is desperately in need of a church that offers a Way of peace, truth, compassion and hope, as opposed to the world's way of power, materialism, exploitation and violence. It needs leaders willing to risk comfort, status and economic

security for the life of the world and the outreach potential of the church. It needs a church that looks less like the Pharisees' religion and more like Jesus' ministry. It needs a church that is willing to sacrifice everything for those outside: buildings, budgets, sacred cows, traditions, structures. It needs a church that so loves the world, that she'd be willing to die for it.

So here's the plan. New policy. Every decision, every single decision made by staff, council and every committee is made on behalf of those not yet here. Every sermon choice, every hymn, song and musical choice, every building and grounds choice, every spending choice is made with outsiders in mind.

When we become a church for the world, the outsider, when the pain of staying the same (and dying of irrelevance) for those already here exceeds the pain of changing (and sacrificing old ways) for those not yet here, we will be the church for which God incarnate came to this earth and gave his life.