

What is the Spirit saying to the church in Toronto?

Eph. 3: 5-9

Ex. 20:8-11

Acts 17: 22-27, 30-32

Mk. 9:38-41

O God, beyond my words, let your word be heard.

As I prepare to leave Toronto, but not my ties to TUMC, someone suggested that I try writing “to the church in Toronto” the way John, the author of the book of Revelation, wrote to seven of the early churches. In each case he asked, “What is the Spirit saying to this church?” I don’t have his confidence! But I am willing to paint four pictures of being church in Toronto and ask you if you think this might be a message to us from the Holy Spirit.

Read Eph

I begin my first picture with one thought from this reading, that of the long hidden mystery of God and God’s creation, finally becoming known in Christ. As I speak these words I am aware that they are both profound and lifegiving as well as worn down and lifetaking. Few people in our society trust religious language. Christians have to earn a hearing from skeptics by the integrity of our lives. Our world once had an imposed religious as well as political order: “God’s in his heaven and all’s right with the world” I learned in public school. Then the holocausts of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany burst into our consciousness. Both believers and unbelievers cried out, “How could a God of love allow such evil to happen?”. This is the question that confronts believers today: how we can speak the name of God with integrity. Are there still times when we can lift up, as Paul says, the mystery of Christ?

Even though I am a theologian by trade I have less confidence in systematic theology than I do in what I would call “unequivocal moments” in the life of the church to make Christ known. Let me illustrate. On Good Friday of this year I was stranded in Winnipeg between the death of my cousin Martha’s husband Neil on the

day before Palm Sunday and the death of her daughter Johanna on the Wednesday of Holy Week. The visitation for Neil was on Maundy Thursday. Good Friday was honoured as the church's day and the funerals followed on Saturday and Monday. On Good Friday a friend invited me to go to church with her in the midst of our sorrow for Martha as well as Jesus. I knew the congregation as one that was theologically and culturally liberal, with space for ambiguity and diversity. But I hoped that it would also recognize the moment when it was called to speak the mystery of the cross into our need.

A solemnity settled over the congregation as the ministers and deacons, all in black, entered. The opening hymn, "Go to dark Gethsemane" gave this solemnity a voice. There followed a series of readings from the passion account accompanied by heartfelt prayers and hymns in gratitude for the relentless love of Jesus. The Communion hymn was "Just as I am", not my favourite hymn, nor, I think, that of the congregation, but in that moment nothing could have expressed our vulnerability to Jesus' vulnerability more profoundly.

This service was an 'unequivocal moment', one in which the cross as the length to which God went to reconcile us, was recounted in all its starkness and power. Such moments belong side by side – not over against – the moments of doubt and lament in a congregation's and a Christian's life.

Read Ex

My second picture takes a line from the giving of the Ten Commandments, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy". In Israel the seventh day was the great equalizer. No one worked. Rich and poor, female and male, slave and free, human and beast were equal. In the early church Sunday became the Christian Sabbath in remembrance of Jesus' resurrection. But it made the same proclamation: that we are freed from the compulsion to work, worry, and shop. The relentlessness of capitalism's drive for ever more markets and ever more profits is stopped every sabbath. The delusion that we must – and can – "earn our own salvation" by uninterrupted work and consumption is exposed.

You might remember the '60s pop song by Marlene Makouri, "You can ask me on a Monday, a Tuesday, a Wednesday, any day you choose. But ask me on a Sunday, a Sunday, a Sunday and see if I refuse." I realized only after years of mindlessly singing these lyrics that the song was about a prostitute who gladly plies her trade on weekdays, but even she sets a limit to her work by reserving Sunday as a day of rest!

Remembering the Sabbath is the singly most formative practice we have in relativizing the drivenness of technological society for ever more information and control. The pressure to buy the lie that meaning is ultimately found in the never to be interrupted pursuit of work and possessions is immense. Only the discipline of dissent will keep Sunday as a jubilee day, a day of re-ordering priorities. So, on the Lord's Day let's squander time, worship God, leave our worries on the doorstep, welcome someone unexpected into our life.

Read Acts

My third picture is that of Paul walking the streets of Athens, troubled by the presence of idols everywhere. But he found one altar with an inscription that caught his eye. It said, "To an unknown god". Paul took his heart in his hands and walked to the front of the Aereopagus, the massive rock in Athens at which citizens gathered to pass judgement on people and ideas. He started his appeal not with what divided him from his hosts but what gave them common ground. "Athenians", he cried out, among your objects of worship I found an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god". Paul paints a picture of God as the sovereign of heaven and earth in a way that includes everyone. He even quotes one of their poems, "In him we live and move and have our being". Then he goes on. God has overlooked our past ignorance but now he has appointed a Man as our judge by raising him from the dead.

The application I want to make of this incident to our lives is not complete. Then the message about Jesus was a novelty that compelled examination. Now Jesus' story has a hollow ring because his followers across the centuries have so often betrayed him. The first part of the incident is easier for us to connect with: Paul

finds himself in the midst of many different beliefs. He senses that his hearers are like him in that all of them are searching for God. When we work for justice we count on common ground with people of other beliefs and value systems. But it is also the case that our society is increasingly indifferent to religion and even the transcendent. But God is not absent, as Paul said, even from such quests. Sometimes we are the voice that speaks God into their reality. I don't think that evangelistic formulas do justice to the uniqueness of authentic encounters. But I do think that at the right time the Holy Spirit offers us the love and the words to give the reason for the hope that is in us if only our polite cynicism doesn't get in the way.

Read Mk

My fourth, and final, picture is that of frustrated disciples complaining to Jesus that they had tried in vain to stop an exorcist from setting someone free of a demon because he was not one of them. First, Jesus has a pragmatic comeback: "No one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me". But, more profoundly he adds, "Whoever is not against us is for us". That should be our starting point when we encounter new religions or ideologies and people different from us who support just causes and do deeds of mercy. Such a disposition is a good antidote to self-righteousness.

But there are times when the opposite is the case. Jesus tells his disciples on another occasion, "Whoever is not for us is against us". Learning how to discern which attitude is called for at a given time requires the wisdom of Solomon. The example of human rights comes to mind. When I worked for MCC at the UN our working document was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was, and remained truly inspiring that a consortium of UN, government, and NGO agencies were united in working for a world in which every gender, race, and class is entitled to equal treatment.

There is much common ground between secular human rights morality and that of the Gospel. In fact, the church was slower than the secular order in naming and working for equal rights for women and LGBT people. There are also places

where they diverge. I wonder if we are coming to a point of divergence on matters of sexuality. Increasingly I read and hear arguments on the diversity of sexual identity and relationships that seem to see covenant and faithfulness as infringements on individual autonomy. This is as true in the straight as in the gay discourse. Might it be the calling of congregations like ours, that have stood up for equal rights for all sexualities, take the initiative in working through what it might mean to practice equality, covenant, and faithfulness as inseparable parts of being a whole person?

I have a sense of urgency as I try to come to terms with the calling of the church in a pluralist society. Perhaps you can sense it. Along with you I'm looking for a way to live in the spirit of Jesus that makes common cause whenever possible but can also muster the conviction to take the path less travelled when the Gospel calls for it. I have described four practices that I think can help us do that.

I illustrated the first practice with the Good Friday service I attended. Our calling is to know the times when faithfulness to Christ calls for unequivocal, unashamed words and gestures and when it calls for patiently living with ambiguity and tentativeness.

The second practice that sustains dissident communities is remembering the Sabbath. Every seventh day we are given a foretaste of what life is like under the reign of God. Every seventh day we are set free to limit the place of worry, work, and consumption in our lives.

Practices three and four concern themselves with seeking commonality and risking nonconformity. Our calling is not to take one or the other, but both. The third practice, from Paul's encounter with the Athenians, concerns what we share with all human beings, as expressed in beliefs and values, and what the Spirit of Christ gives us to live and speak to people looking for deeper faith and community.

The fourth practice is to learn when "Whoever is not against us is for us", when we owe it to our fellow human beings to stand up for universal rights. By the same token we need to learn when "Whoever is not for us is against us", when the Gospel compels us to dissent when the wholeness of human relationships is not given its due.

Are the pictures I have painted in keeping with what the Spirit is saying to us? As we grapple with that question, let's always remember that in the end our confidence lies not in us choosing God but in God choosing us, the God whose steadfast love is higher than the heavens and whose faithfulness reaches to the clouds. "For those who trust God's changeless love build on the rock that will not move." Amen.