

Text: Philippians 2: 1-11
Title: Naked Church ~ Reloaded
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The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life recently released the first set of findings from its massive US Religious Landscape Survey 2008 ~ the most comprehensive study of religious life in America in decades. The study uses all sorts of provocative phrases to summarize the data: For example:

*Many Americans switch faith identity...
Constant movement...
Protestants are fading...
A quantum leap in the rate of change...
Churn, churn, churn...*

What the study reveals is that religious life in America is in flux. While 51.3% of the adult population identify themselves as Protestants that slice of the population is in steady decline. For example 62% of those who are 70 and older are Protestants, while only 43% of those between 18 and 29 describe themselves that way. The largest net growth of any grouping was among those who described themselves as “nothing in particular.” The largest net loss for any faith community is Catholicism. Nearly one third of those who claimed to have been raised Catholic no longer label themselves that way.

We live in an age of remarkable religious fluidity. I have been privy to a variety of conversations lately with church and Christian school leaders who are wrestling with declining memberships and declining enrollments and they are scrambling and searching for new ways in which to do church and do school in this shifting, churning, changing reality.

As Dr. James Wind, the president of Alban Institute, puts it:

Once upon a time religious leaders represented very distinct religious communities that were clearly differentiated from the ones down the street or across town. Now our leaders work in a sea of religious vagueness and search for ways to help people, surrounded by a growing tide of “nothing in particular,” find something in particular to build a life upon.

It is in this restless sea that we would try to clear away some of the flotsam and jetsam and get at what is essential to church.

French aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupery in writing about the relationship between function and design offers this:

In anything at all, perfection is finally attained not when there is no longer anything to add, but when there is no longer anything to be taken away, when a body has been stripped down to nakedness.

So, this morning I'd like to strip down to naked church.

What is its functional simplicity?

What is the stable core in the midst of complex change?

In all the vagueness and all the variance, in all the flux and fluidity,

what is essential to being church?

The Christ hymn in Paul's letter to the Philippians offers a helpful framework. We can lift out of that beautiful song four marks, posts, purposes, pillars, or themes of being church. We can find there an outline of naked church.

I. Community – Fellowship

The First Reformed Church of Schenectady had women's groups. They learned, laughed, and lunched together. They raised kids together, saw each other through life changes, and made treats for church functions. They met for lectures, holiday parties, field trips, and funerals. At one point there were better than a dozen groups; but as the congregation declined they dwindled down to two groups. Life was busier, more women were working, the church was smaller, and an era of church organization was dying off.

But, then a mother of four in her forties gathered together a collection of younger women and resurrected a women's group. She told me she wanted to make sure there was somebody there to make treats for her funeral. She really did it because she longed for an experience of community that was more intentional, more intimate, and more enduring.

At its essence the church is community. It is not just one person standing naked before God, nor is it a random collection of autonomous individuals. The church is a web of mutual dependency. Now, that may smack of the obvious, but by its very nature church is people together.

Some of you have found a core community at Hope – for ten, twenty, or thirty years, this community has been your sustaining community. You have raised children together, weathered storms together, gone on field trips together, and built a web together. You have some expectation that treats will be served at your funeral by those seated around you. You may have better friends in other places; you may have people you like better in other places; but you know finally that church is a web of mutually dependent people.

Dear friends, the long haul heath of Hope Church will be shaped not by preaching panache, musical styles, liturgical sensibilities, or a smorgasbord of programs. For, preaching will falter, music will sometimes unite and sometimes divide, and liturgy will

lose its luster, but finally how we encourage and enfold, how we tether and tend community will be what sustains church life.

For, if there is a common encouragement from being united with Christ,
a common comfort from love,
a common fellowship with the Spirit,
a common tenderness and compassion,
a common joy, then it will be found in life together.

The first mark of church is community or fellowship.

II. Education – Training

Earlier this spring Joe Huizenga was examined for a preaching license by Classis Chicago South of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. What that means is a gaggle of ministers and elders gathered in a little church and asked him questions. There were questions that tried to get at his heart and his sense of self, but primarily there were questions about what he thought and what he knew. Joe met muster and passed with flying colors.

I was reminded through that exam that there is a not just a body of biblical knowledge, historical characters, and theological positions, but there is a habit of mind, a way of thinking, that is essential.

Church has to do with your mind, with how you think. Paul's language is that we would be "like minded." While faith is not the substance of facts and ideas, there is unmistakably a content with which faith is engaged.

We have a scripture, a set of confessions, and a way of thinking that we are responsible to, and responsible for.

We can enjoy it and explore it.

We can wrestle with it and wrangle against it.

We can question it and fight it.

We can push against it, proclaim it, and uncover new ways of framing it,
but finally there is an "it" with which we interact.

An essential part of church is passing on a tradition of scripture and a discipline of mind. Lord knows we won't always agree, and yet we make a place under the tent ~ all are welcome, there is hospitality and community for all ~ but under this tent we will be struggling with and seeking after the mind of Christ.

So, I would offer that the second mark of the church is education. The long haul health of Hope will be shaped not just by how we sustain community, but by how this community carries the torch of education or training. I know that young families don't need slick programs, but they are looking for a community committed to helping them with their children's faith formation. And, as we've been blessed with babies and baptisms, as we

take great delight in watching all those little munchkins parade out to learn and listen and be trained of mind, may we be reminded that education is essential to being church.

III. Servanthood - Mission

There is a colorful little word in the middle of the Christ hymn from which a whole series of actions fall. *Harpagmos* is faithfully rendered in the RSV as “exploited.” Jesus...

*...did not consider equality with God something to be exploited,
but made himself nothing....*

The word has the sense of something that is snatched or seized for personal gain.

Jesus had a unique vantage point.

He had a position of privilege.

He had a place of power.

He had the prerogative to exploit equality with God.

But ~ he let it go. He emptied himself. He became a servant.

You know the lines... It falls all the way to death ~ even death on a cross.

It is easy to exploit church as a community of friends.

It is easy to exploit church as a tool to pass on meaning and morality to our children.

But, if the church is that community gathered in the mind of Christ than it exists to serve; it exists to empty itself.

The third essential mark of the church is servant-hood or mission.

The provocative question is how then does Hope function as servant?

How is that we can let go of what we grasp

for the sake of others,

for the sake of creation,

for the sake of the cross?

What is Hope's unique vantage point?

How is Hope uniquely gifted to look to the interests of others?

How can Hope give up self?

Now, we may struggle with how to serve collectively and how to balance that with what we do individually, and we may squabble about the relationship between evangelism and social justice and mission and meaning and...

But, if we're not turning our face outward,

if we not asking the question,

if we not letting go of our prerogative in this complex unbalanced, broken world,
then we are missing something essential to being church.

One element of the functional simplicity of church is servanthood ~ mission.

IV. Worship

For the last few years I've been going to the "Festival of Homiletics." It is a fancy name for a preaching conference. I like it because I can just listen. There are no small groups. There is no sharing. There is no expectation. I can just find my place in the back and listen.

I have noticed that I usually go tired ~ tired of church, tired of talking, tired of me, tired of trying to write sermons. And every year the preachers are remarkable and I am inspired and I usually want to keep trying my hand at this preaching business and try to do it better....

But, I think I go the festival as much for the music. Every day the music changes: classical, jazz, black gospel, earnest acoustic warblers, and grand hymns with big pipe organs. And, almost every year something in me breathes, and there is confession and joy and thanksgiving and hope and...

There is a lot of religious chatter about worship –about styles and expressions and tastes and values and traditions. I often grow weary of it. I am confident that there are all sorts of different expression for all sorts of different people. But, at its naked self church is participating with what creation is already doing and will do. At its essence church is joining in the motion of all knees bowing and all tongues confessing

that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Church is worship ~ intentional, gathered, mindful, confessional, thanksgiving, hopeful....From the highest of cathedrals to pounding Pentecostal piano,
from guitar strumming granola to liturgical straight jackets,
from free-wheeling-frenzied-dance to high tech corporate gloss,
from being seeker sensitive to being separate from the world,
church is worship. Style seems secondary; worship seems essential.

Church is that community gathered in the mind of Christ to forget self and be open to God.

Community, Education, Servanthood, Worship ~ those are the naked marks under which we have been organizing our life together. In a churning changing sea finding our mooring with those essential posts seems crucial. To that end,
may we journey in community together,
may we seek the mind of Christ together,
may we serve others together,
may we worship together.

And, in is so doing herald that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

