

“We are called to be the church,
to celebrate God’s presence” Isa 65:1-2, 17; 66:12-13
1 Peter 2: 1-5; 9-10

November 15, 09, Sunday Night Service

A sales Rep was preparing for the most important presentation of his life and was very nervous; so he went to his psychiatrist for help. The psychiatrist offered to plant a hypnotic suggestion in his mind.

He told the man to just say to himself, “one, two, three” and he would give the most brilliant presentation of his life.

“But,” said the psychiatrist, “don’t, whatever you do, say , “one two, three, four”. If anyone says that, you’ll just freeze up, lose your train of thought, make a complete fool of yourself”

The sales rep was ecstatic. He went home and practised on his family. It was a fabulous presentation. He tried it at work and his colleagues gave him a standing ovation.

Then the big day came. Everything was set up in the board room and the CEO signaled him to start. The sales rep whispered under his breath, “one two three”.

The CEO, hearing this, leaned over and asked, “what did you say one, two, three, for?”

There are some people, particularly outside of the church, who see the function of church and religion rather like that psychiatrist- a place where one can go to be propped up, a crutch for one’s weakness, something that can be used as a formula for success, but one that only really works half the time.

This is a total misunderstanding of church, to think that we come here primarily for help with our little problems- We may receive help, don’t get me wrong- but church is something very much bigger than our own purposes, than our own pain and struggle.

Church flows out of GOD’S purposes, out of God’s pain and longing to make the world new.

We say in our creed that we are CALLED to be the church, not that we’ve decided that it’s a good IDEA to meet together and pool some money so that we can have a building and a minister and can pray together for all the stuff we want.

No, we say that church is God’s idea. God has CALLED us here. In Isaiah before a prayer is on human lips, God cries out to US, saying, “hello, I’m here, I’m your creator, I’ve got a plan for you, listen to me, talk to me”.

God says “I am about to create a new heaven and a new earth.” God WANTS to make the world NEW and the church is part of God’s implementation plan.

We are here, each one of us because the Spirit of God has spoken to us in our hearts, has called us- perhaps we were opened to hear God's call through our baptisms and we've always come to church.

Or perhaps we heard God's call through some tragic event in our lives, or perhaps through a friend's invitation, or a whole multitude of circumstances.

Each of us is here because we have heard and responded to God's call to us.

And we've been CALLED into COMMUNITY. When Jesus called the first disciples, he didn't just tap them on the shoulder and say, off you go now, Peter, into the world. Go on now, James.

No, he gathered them together into a community where they could learn from him and support one another. This is God's plan for making the world new, to start with a gathered community.

Peter says that we are to allow ourselves to be built into a living temple, a body of people alive with God's Spirit. Each of us is to be a living stone, so to speak, a brick that supports others and is in turn supported by them.

I read recently a very touching story. Bob Butler had lost both legs in a land mine explosion in Vietnam. 20 years later, he was working in his garage when he heard a woman screaming.

He left his wheelchair and crawled through the dirt and bushes to his neighbour's backyard, where a 3 year old girl was lying at the bottom of the pool. She had been born without arms and couldn't swim and it seems neither could her mother.

Butler dove to the bottom of the pool and brought little Stephanie up to the deck. She was blue and had no pulse.

He frantically went to work performing CPR while the mother called the fire department, only to discover the paramedics were already out on a call. She was beside herself with terror.

As Butler continued with his CPR, he calmly reassured her. "Don't worry," he said, "I was her arms to get out of the pool. It'll be O.K. Now I'm her lungs. Together we can make it"

Seconds later the little girl coughed and regained consciousness. The mother asked Butler how he knew it would be OK. And he told her: when his legs were blown off in the war, he was all alone in a field. There was no one to help but a young Vietnamese woman.

And as she struggled to drag him into her village, she whispered in broken English, "It OK. You can live. I be your legs. Together we make it". And he did.

The church is a little like that young woman sharing her legs, and that legless man sharing his arms and his lungs. I don't want to suggest that we're all crippled and broken, but we do all have weaknesses, just as we all have strengths.

Oftentimes we think that before we can serve, before we can be useful to God, we need to get over our weaknesses. We need first to solve our own problems, to wait till the children are grown, till we've retired, till we've got our health back, till we're no longer afraid.....

We could wait a life time and never share what we do have to give. Now God may choose to heal what is broken in our lives, but God doesn't need to do so in order to use us. God can use us in and through and in spite of our weaknesses. And does, if we are willing.

God draws us together into community so that we can each offer what we can do, with the support of others who have different abilities, and who compensate for our weaknesses.

TOGETHER we can live. TOGETHER we can make it. Together we can serve God's greater purposes. Just as we are. Today.

The rest of the United Church Creed focuses on how God wants to make the world new through the church: by sending us out to love and serve others, to care for creation, to resist evil and seek justice, to tell others of God's love in Jesus Christ.

When we look at the world and see all the evil and oppression and need, we can feel pretty overwhelmed.

We need to remember that not only do we have one another, but it is God who has gathered us,

Herbert Jackson tells how as a new missionary in the field, he was assigned a car and discovered that it would not start without a push. He eventually devised what he thought was quite a clever plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off.

Then as he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave the engine running. He did this every day for two years.

When a new missionary came to that station, Jackson proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started. The new man began looking under the hood. "Why, Dr. Jackson," he said, "I believe there is a loose cable." He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, turned it on, and to Jackson's astonishment, the engine roared to life.

For two years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. So much of what we try to do in the church, we try to do in our own power. There are all these needs in the world, and we say, come on guys push; we need some more people here, some more money here, push.

The suffering and evil in the world is too great for us to take it on in our own power. And that's why God gathers us into a church, not just so that we can support one another, but so that we can celebrate GOD'S presence.

God gathers us here together because God longs to FILL us and FEED us with spiritual food, to EMPOWER us to serve God in the world.

Isaiah uses the image of God as a nursing mother. Any woman here who has nursed her baby knows that physically one's need for the baby to nurse is just as great as that baby's need.

Peter says that we should seek pure spiritual milk. Well the flip side of that is that God longs to release the milk of the Spirit, so to speak. God longs to feed us and fill us. And so we need to keep seeking that spiritual food.

You maybe know the story of the traveler in the desert who was dying of thirst and had a vision, where an angel showed him where to dig under the sand for water.

He was so grateful that he decided to leave a stone at that place with instructions, so the next person would know where to dig.

The next traveler who found the stone was so thrilled and grateful that he added a circle of stones to make sure that the place was not missed. Then a wealthy man passed by and in gratitude decided to build a shrine over the well.

And then an even wealthier traveler came by, but he somehow missed the instructions to dig for water. Nevertheless, he was grateful for the quiet place to worship, and noticing that the shrine needed a floor; he covered it over with stones.

Today many travelers come from far and wide to seek the peace and quiet of the "desert shrine" as it has become known. No one knows any more how it came to be built. But if you put your ear to the floor, you can still hear the sound of running water.

Coming here to this church to seek peace and quiet from our busy lives is good. But this gathered community where we celebrate God's presence, offers more than that, more than just hearing stories of how God in distant times poured God's power into the church.

There is water in the well. And if there are stones in the way, we need to rip them up, because the purpose of God's calling us here is so that we may drink from the well of God's spirit.

How do we drink? I'd like in conclusion just to go through what we do here in worship: We always begin by praising God. Not because God demands praise but because this focuses our minds on the source from which we come to drink.

We tell God that we're sorry for the wrongs we have done, not so that we can beat ourselves up- we do that anyway all week-

No, we lay our lives before God and invite God to come and deal with us, to cut away whatever binds us, and to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves- to set us free to love and live fully.

And then we listen for God to speak to us as we hear scripture read and preached. And so we feed on the Word of God which Jesus says is the bread that truly satisfies.

And in our prayers and meditation we give our thanks to God, not because God needs to be thanked, but because that is one of the ways we receive God's blessings into us.

And we pray for others and the world. This isn't so much our bringing a wish list to God, as it is wanting good for others with a deep longing. When our hearts genuinely ache for others, then we connect with God's heart cry.

Then the Spirit of God prays in us and remarkable things can happen, sometimes through our prayers alone and sometimes through the actions that God prompts in us through our prayers.

And we make our offering. We say "here I am, Lord. I've heard you calling. I'm here if you will use me. I offer my money, my gifts, my life, use me..." and God does.

And together with God we make it through, God together with us unfolds God's plan for the world.

To God be all the praise, the honour and the glory, Amen.