

Follow Jesus, Receiver

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3: 13-17

We most often think of Jesus as leading his disciples on a journey both of spiritual growth and also a physical journey, from where he grew up in Nazareth through the countryside to Jerusalem. But one of the most amazing stories about Jesus is the day that his leadership meant saying, “no, really, you do it.” John the Baptist had been teaching and leading people into the desert to repent, to become self aware of what they were called to be, to receive the forgiveness of God, and to return home different. Scholars think that most likely (for at least a year or so) Jesus had been someone who went out to hear John; that he heard from John the call both to prepare himself for the way and also to begin to think about what Isaiah meant when Isaiah said, “I’ve called you forth and I will fill you up with my spirit.”

As Jesus began to realise what the way would be for him, perhaps even realizing that he was The Way, he approached John for one last time. He did so for a moment wherein he was not the leader. John, of course, says, “I can’t baptize you...like, your *Jesus*.” Now, of course, no one else in the room or (sorry) in the countryside, knew Jesus as famous yet, but John recognised him both as cousin and as someone John had probably heard speaking around the campfire. “Yes,” says Jesus, “you must baptise me.”

And Jesus then went into three years of ministry and does not baptize anyone. He will let his disciples know, in his final days, that one of the things they must do - we must do- if we are following Jesus, is to give others the experience he had with John: baptise them.

I just started a new book, *The Hidden Lives of Congregations*. I know right!

Yeah, it's not at all about what you think is about. I was ready to learn about secret rendezvous in the parking lot after Board meetings, the not so secret “meetings” that people have with Brad in Memorial Hall where they try and let Brad know *how* he should fix the roof, the meetings that Karen and I have with so many people that end with ‘this doesn't go anywhere right?’

Instead, Israel Galindo writes about something that makes churches unique among organisations. In most organizations, there is a set of By-Laws that are hoped for, the things we're going to do together and everyone that's part of the organization knows that every other member of the organization is going to go about doing their best, but they're not going to be perfect. I mean they're only human.

But churches? We have an added dynamic. We're not just supposed to serve people at our door, baptize people, tell people the good news of forgiveness and grace; *we're supposed to treat one another like Jesus treated people.*

People walk in here, people who have been here for 60 years and people like Emmett (the baby we baptized this morning) who just came in the doors, expecting this place to be Church: a place where even the meetings in the parking lot are Holy and Sacred. Galindo calls this 'Big C' Church. And while it is wonderful and called for and needed in the world... it never has existed. The only people that are part of the 'Big C' Church are you and me. And I don't know about you but I'm not perfect and so we all get 'little c' church.

Now 'little c' church is awesome! I obviously liked it so much I bought into the pension plan and everything. But 'little c' church takes on a weird dynamic where we expect everyone to be on their best behaviour, just because they are a church. Then we debate about what that best behaviour is ... and sometimes those debates are Christian and loving. Sometimes they're less than that.

My first experience at a large church meeting included the chair of a committee standing up (God bless her) and saying, "well if this doesn't pass, I quit."

I was 13, I was the youth representative on the committee that she was going to quit and I went home crying. "Mom, if Shelley¹ quits ... that would just be so sad." And my mom laughed. "Mum, why are you laughing?" She said, "She'd never quit." I said "Excuse me, she was quite adamant." Well that's when I learned, we all have all types of behaviours in the church.

We have folks who if they're made unhappy by a Motion, threaten to quit. We have people who carefully write the Motions. We have people who make the Motions. We have secretaries who then write those Motions up and might tweak them, hence the reason we read all the minutes double checking before we approve. There are people who unlike the woman I heard, do quit and leave *but* never let us know why (so we don't have the chance to try at least a little bit to be 'Big C' church.)

And this also by the way is not just lay people! I have been to meetings where with 100% ministers, there is the person who's trying to write the Motion to get what they want and there is the minister who says, "If this does not pass..."

and we all think, "Oh please, please, please quit." (also "small c" Church behaviour)

They never do ... they never do. And we all show up together at church worships and meetings again and again.

We hope that guests have a good time. We hope that we will learn something new today and that our children will have fun. That's what we hope. But because 'Big C' Church doesn't actually exist,

¹ Name changed because...well we all have moments of being "Shelley."

our hearts get broken just a little bit by hurtful behaviours. More so than if we go to a store. If they're trying to sell us something that does not work when we get home, we will be disappointed (we may return it too). We *don't* feel that someone has broken their vow to God.

Sometimes coming to church and watching people betray, gossip, lie ... it's hard to remember that in 'Big C' Church and 'little c' church - we're supposed to love, give feedback, model, mess up and start again.

Here are some things from Isaiah's wisdom and John's wisdom of what it means to be part of 'Big C' Church and thus find in 'little c' church.

First, it takes humility. Now I don't mean "don't put your chin up; speak very quietly," humility. Humility is a word that comes from humus; earth, soil, dirt. It is limited and vulnerable. That is what we are. God chose us ...made of dirt, dust, water, - things tied to this earth, dependent on its nourishment and dependent on each other - that is how we are made! God gave us this responsibility of being church. So, the first part of being part of church is accepting your vulnerabilities; your imperfections.

Humility also means remembering that you are also Blessed! All that dirt, soil, earthiness that is you...you also have been breathed upon by the Maker of Heaven and Earth. You have been IN-spirited and the unique gifts that you have, the unique decisions you make and the unique relationships that you develop are God given. You are never independent of God's Spirit. You are never independent of your earthly community and connections. Humility means speaking your truth, knowing that it is not the only truth.

If you turn to your Isaiah reading, you'll notice an odd line for leadership. Isaiah says that God's servant is coming and that they will not cry or lift up their voice or make it heard in the street. Those who study what Jesus did will note that while Jesus wasn't *usually* a yeller - he definitely was heard in the street. Then I playfully inserted the word 'just'.

"He will not cry or lift up his voice 'just' to hear his own voice, 'just' to be heard." He will not cry or lift up his voice to seek power, but to care for the bruised reed, for the dimly burning wick and thus he will faithfully bring forth justice on the earth. Jesus, who had everything - fully human and fully divine - was humble enough to listen, to use "I" statements, to give feedback and to receive it, to receive baptism and to call us to also lead!

Secondly, being part of the "little c" church that seeks to get a "bigger C" is prayerful leadership. For me this has two parts, praying for ourselves and others. For ourselves, we take time to be self aware before we act or speak *and* for others taking time to assume best intentions when others act or speak. P

For example, I know enough about myself to know that between December 15th and say March 1st I'm on the grumpy side. Sometimes I'm really, really, grumpy for a reason or two. But even

on a great day, I will default to grumpy during this time of year. Prayerfully, I try and limit sharing my grumpiness as best I can. For others though?

I feel resentment when other people are grumpy. Part of prayerful leadership is to know that if I'm feeling grumpy just cause the sun is not shining - there is a possibility that this person's grumpiness has nothing to do with me.

(at this point in time Emme, a member of our congregation began chatting at a quiet but audible volume)

Right now for example, I am preaching and Emme is telling a story. Without the self awareness, I could think - why is someone interrupting me and my great thoughts. However, I could breath and reflect on my core values first. "Wow, wouldn't it be amazing to grow up in this church - where you can tell your mom a story while she's also trying to listen to the sermon and that that's just perfectly fine - because you're Emme, a child of God and you get to be who you are in this place. The adults will just have to figure out how to block one ear and listen with the other. and adults can do that. Even me."

I want to grow in my self awareness of what I am feeling, what my core values are and how I want tot treat others. I want to grow into being the "biggest C" Church I can). I learn how to do this from people like you! This week's prayerful leadership in this community has included people come to Rev. Karen and I and saying: I need an hour of your time as well as people who have expressed their need to volunteer at church because of stuff going on in their life. Yesterday, as you probably noticed, was a very cold Saturday. And so, three groups of prayerful leaders in this church, two committees and the Board, thought: we need to meet even if the only room place available is the Chapel. When you walk past the Chapel today, you'll realise why we have it closed... is it not insulated. These leaders? They showed up, they listened to each other, they spoke to be heard and then asked questions to each other and listened. They were creative. If you want to give her double points, the Mum listening to Emme's story and my sermon right now, facilitated the day!

Are we perfect? No. Are we ever going to be perfect? No. And when people come in and we're having a bad day, they will be disappointed in us because they are seeking that 'Big C' church, that does not exist. But we are 'small c' church, striving to be the biggest "C" Church we can.

We get together, we try our best, we feed people, we feed ourselves. Families give us the great blessing of celebrating this font with them. Whether your baptism is in your future or your past, this font declares God's love may be as ordinary as water, but it is as *powerful* as water.

God's love pours down on us no matter the size of the 'c' in our churchiness - transforming us! May God empower all of us to lead Christian lives wherever we find ourselves in the coming weeks: humble, prayerful and ... with a good sense of humour. Amen.