

Why Church? Why Now? What Now?
 Matthew 28:16-20
 January 31, 2010

Why Church? Why Now?

Over these last several weeks we have explored the question of *Why Church? Why now?* In the first sermon I invited us to think about the past year and decade, note the highs and lows in our individual and communal lives, and the places where we saw God at work and present in our lives. I shared my fear that we might become stuck in a sort of cruise-control Christianity, gliding along comfortably, but not putting much thought into what we are doing here in church, let alone why we are doing it.

The second week we talked about the value of community, and the spirit of *Gemeinschaft* (togetherness); that there is profound power in gathering and sharing with one another, we are more together than we are apart, and when we gather we can expect to encounter the Holy, see the Messiah, Jesus, among us.

The third segment explored the question, *What's in it for me?* I noted some of the cultural and congregational trends nationally. Namely, that "the church" is losing its reputation and standing in society. We can no longer count on our pews being filled because it's the sociologically "right" thing to do. We also named the treasures to be found for each of us when we gather: we grow our connection to the Holy, we better learn how to love one another and our neighbor as we care and are cared for, we study our biblical and religious tradition, and we serve one another and the world.

Last week, Josh was supposed to preach, but blacked out and missed worship. Luckily, a Brethren Elder from 1868, Johann Tindallspiel, was caught in a time warp and we were able to share how we as Brethren have changed through the years and held fast to tradition.

What now? What if?

Today is the last segment of *Why Church? Why now?* If gathering as the body of Christ, under the banner of the Church of the Brethren is a worthwhile endeavor...If the church still has a place...where do we go from here? What now?

Actually, I'd like to change the question from *What Now?* To *What if?* I would like to offer four shifts in the way we think about, and do, church. I offer these shifts even as I feel that we are on the right track as a congregation. None of them is terribly drastic, none is a dramatic change from what we are doing now. But...if we fully embraced these shifts the entire nature and future of our gathering would change forever.

Matthew 28.16-20 (NRSV)

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

What if...we fully claimed the word “we” when talking about our gathering here?

How many times have you heard something along the lines of:

“My goodness that is a problem, I wonder what *they* are going to do about it.”

“When are they going to stop this foolishness?” (Whatever “this foolishness” has been determined to be)

When I hear statements like these I’m never sure whether “they” means the pastoral team, the Church Board, or anyone who’s daring or foolish enough to tackle the problem; I’m not sure the questioners know either. But, how would our fellowship change if we embraced a linguistic and philosophical approach that substituted just one little word in these previous statements, from “they” to “we”. Even if we aren’t on the board, commission, committee, task force or team ultimately responsible, this shift would signal that we are in this together, that we operate together. That *WE* are the body of Christ.

“My goodness that is a problem, I wonder what *we* are going to do about it.”

“I wonder when *we* are going to stop this foolishness? I wonder what I could do to help?”

In this month’s edition of the denominational magazine, *Messenger*¹, a story was told of a couple from eastern Pennsylvania who honeymooned in West Virginia. On their trip home they decided that they would stop in Gettysburg for the day and see the sights, including the battlefield, by tandem bicycle. Five miles in things were going well when they came to the 150 foot climb of Little Round Top. The husband, wanting to impress his new bride and prove his manly worth, put everything he had into the climb—up on the pedals huffing and puffing (as quietly as he could to prove his manliness), beads of sweat rolling down his face. When they reached the top he announced: “That was tough. I didn’t think we were going to make that one, it was so steep.” With a relieved look on her face she replied: “I know. I was so scared we would roll backwards that I had the brakes on the whole way.”

WE have to embrace OUR church life and ministry together. This is the first shift: from *they* to *we*. The second *What if?* is this...

What if we shifted our image of church from fenced pasture to a well in the Outback?

Dennis Lohr² (pastor at the Palmyra Church of the Brethren), has written an article for *Brethren Life and Thought* that explores this idea.³ The Outback of Australia is the vast interior of that continent that is arid and inhospitable. But it does grow grass. And because of that, it has the largest cattle operations in the world.⁴ Ranches that are so big that fencing them would be cost prohibitive (We’re talking millions of square acres!). So in order to keep track of their cattle over thousands of square miles they dig wells. The idea is that cows will stay within a certain range of their water source. This differs from how we raise cattle around here. Here we use fences to keep our livestock where we want them, safe from harm and not mixed up with the neighbors’ herd. Makes sense in our setting.

¹ January /February 2010, p. 13, article by David Miller.

² Soon to appear in *Brethren Life and Thought*

³ Dennis notes Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*. Pp. 47-51

⁴ Anna Creek Station is the largest in the world at about 6,000,000 acres!

But when I think about wells, I am reminded of biblical wells. I think of the well that sustained Hagar when she was banished to the wilderness by Sarai, and Moses when he fled Pharaoh. A well is where Isaac met his wife Rebekah. Wells were life-sustaining necessities for the water they provided, and also places where people would come together for the life sustaining experience of community. It was a well where the Samaritan woman found Jesus and had her life changed. As different as life is today, the world still needs places of refuge when we find ourselves in the wilderness, gathering places to build relationship and community, and a place where we can find Jesus. Our world still needs wells.

But Dennis makes the observation that our way of doing church often mirrors those fenced pastures more than wells in the Outback. Of course there are gates in our fenced areas—we wish to invite people in. But viewing the church as a well rather than a fenced in area would be somewhat new to us, and admittedly new to the historically sectarian Church of the Brethren. But as we know, we are changing as a people. We are no longer a farming, immobile, cloistered community. We are now part of a fast-moving, highly mobile culture. But one thing does not change. We still need a place and a people with whom we can share life's journey and our experience with God. We need a well.

What if we fully claimed our understanding of Jesus, *even though it looks different than what much of Christianity is proposing?*

Gifted by our tradition as Brethren, and our 100 years as a congregation, we possess a Christian perspective that is exceptional in our culture (but I believe is the well in life for which many are thirsting). Think about it: In a country and world that wages war, we long for peace with justice. Whereas islands of independence are proposed as the perfect paths to happiness, we believe that genuine community is closer to Jesus' teaching. In a culture that defines by difference and belittles those who are different, we work for unity through understanding, mutual respect and love as we accept all striving to be Christ-like regardless of color, gender, sexual orientation, or theological or political perspective. In a landscape that idolizes personal gain, we seek to serve. In a Christian context where most preach that Jesus as a once and done savior (and that we need to check our brains at the door in order to have that prescribed "faith" and assurance), we know Jesus as the one who has changed—and is changing—our lives as we follow his way every day, heart and mind.

Obviously we're not perfect, but we are special. On the surface we may look like many other churches, but folks, we're a bit weird. But "strange in a good way" as a friend of mind likes to say. What if we claimed it, embraced it, owned it? This leads me to our last *What if?* What if we not only claimed who we are, but (gasp!) shared this with others?

What if we were willing to unabashedly share our understanding of Jesus and his message with those around us?

Sharing our faith in word is uncomfortable for many of us. It immediately conjures images of pushy church folk and manipulative preachers trying their best to swell their flock using Jesus' name, and under the banner of Matthew 28, our scripture this morning. Actually, because this scripture was so often the club with which a lot of (often well meaning) Christians bludgeoned the world, I could hardly stand these few verses—until I read them.

This scripture actually has less to do with church growth than has been put upon it. The key verses--19 and 20—read: “**Go**, therefore and **make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and **teaching** them to obey everything I have commanded.”

The verbs in these verses are indicative of its meaning. The first word is “go”. Not call people to come, but go. Go to them, meet them where they are. The next verb in the text is “disciple.” (Though often translated as “make disciples”) This verb in Greek meant to walk alongside, apprentice, and teach. The third verb, translated “baptize” is literally to immerse. Immerse people in the God, Jesus and Spirit. And the last verb is “teach”.

What if we saw ourselves as teachers, mentors and sharers of the good news as we have come to know it? What if we went and invited to the well rather than tried to rope people into the pen? Sure we are shy about this because we have all seen it done in ways that felt uncomfortable, distasteful, manipulative and even biblically uninformed. But there is another way. And it is needed.

Paul Grout, former Church of the Brethren Moderator, captured this sentiment well recently: “Many with Christian backgrounds wonder how their faith relates to what is so powerfully emerging within their spirits and yet seems so alien to the preset agenda of the church.”⁵ Sometimes we don’t share what we’ve found here because we don’t want to impose upon others—but we forget that this place was once introduced to us and we found something special here. Do we presume that we are so odd that others wouldn’t want to join?

I propose the opposite. We’re so odd—let’s say unique—that others may want to join us for precisely that reason. Most of those who’ve come to our well in the last few years have said we were just what they needed. Many would have classified themselves as disaffected Christians. People who had grown up in church but had become disturbed and disillusioned with their experience that they left.

We have a gift to share. What if we shared it? Not because we want to keep the church alive, but because we are people who have thirsted and found a well in the Outback; because we wish to share this refreshing and sustaining source of life. Because we are people of love.

⁵ *Messenger*, January/February 2010, p. 7.