

**SYNOD – OCT 14, 2005 - Mk8:22-25 - "HMMM - THAT'S NOT QUITE IT -
YET"**

It is a huge honour for me to be preaching to the Synod here in Trail, and an occasion that leaves me with a wide and complex range of emotions. On the one hand I am back in the land of my ancestors – my Grandfather moved to New Denver in the late 1890's, and was Clerk of Session at Knox, New Denver for three decades or so. My Grandmother was still active in WMS and Synodicals well into the late 1940's, and both of them have been here in Trail many times, including for Synod occasions. My father was born in New Denver in 1907, and left there in 1927 to attend UBC. From 1922 on he was one of B.C.'s pioneers in Amateur Radio, building sets and putting up antennas with which he was able to reach the 'outside' world from the beautiful Slocan Valley.

On the other hand, I feel another kinship with Trail, in that I grew up and call as my "home town" Sudbury, Ontario, and indeed worked for INCO Ltd. for some twenty years before entering the ministry. As I walked the streets of Trail this morning it felt very much like Sudbury, but with bigger hills! The buildings are familiar, the street names are familiar, the people are familiar, and to know that my familial predecessors walked these streets is very comforting, and emotionally significant, and hoists a ton of memories!

One of those memories relates to the arrival of television in Sudbury in the early 1950's. With Dad still being an active Ham operator in those days, and being able to get a good employee discount at CGE for a new television set, we were among the first families in Sudbury to have a television set. Those of you that like me have a few years on (not to mention a corresponding few pounds!) will remember those days with mixed nostalgia, in particular the high art of adjusting the rabbit ear antennas – the old "V" ones with the arms that could be twisted this way and that until the picture was 'optimal'. And of course you couldn't do it while standing in front of the set, so often you had to get (or got, whether you wanted them or not) comments on the effects of your changes. "More, less, back, again, just a bit more, that's not quite it, yet – hold it, don't move!"

Now, for you youngsters among us (what a grand opportunity to be pompous as I say that, having long waited my time!), this is somewhat analogous to playing with .asp or .php pages while developing a website ... that's also a process that needs tweaking,

and retrying, all the while hearing your boss or your partner or whoever is leaning over your shoulder say, “nope, that’s not quite it, yet”

Do these thoughts fit with our short reading from Mark’s gospel, the story of the blind man healed by Jesus at Bethsaida? I believe they do. That story is a short little episode: Jesus and his disciples arrive at Bethsaida, where some friends bring a blind man to Jesus begging him to touch him, presumably assuming that a mere touch by Jesus will heal the man and cure his blindness. Jesus does touch him, taking him by the hand, and leading him out of the village, but that touch apparently wasn’t quite the touch that was needed, apparently because more touching was needed. And more touching happened ... this time complete with saliva – an image that as a boy from a mining town I can fully appreciate (think of grabbing a shovel, or a scaling bar!)

This time the story resolves quickly – a second touch, everything’s hunky-dory, badda-bing, badda-boom, another miracle healing, and we can heave a sigh of relief and carry on, comfortable in our faith. But I’m not going to let you off the hook quite so quickly, to let you find that comfortable resolution just yet.

“Can you see anything?” Jesus asks the man. “Well, that’s not quite it, yet”, he responds. “I can see people, like trees walking.” Kind of gives us the idea that the man hadn’t been born blind, doesn’t it, since he apparently knows what people look like, what trees look like, and what walking looks like. Does that matter? Is it relevant? I’m not really sure, but it is a curiously specific way to answer that question, isn’t it? He could have answered, “I see something, but I don’t know what.” His answer reveals that he had enough vision together with enough experience to begin to have some clarity of sight and understanding, even if it was not yet complete.

Is the need for a second touch by Jesus to “get it right” because He didn’t have the power to get it right the first time? Was there something about the blindness that required a double-dose of touching? I think the answer to that is pretty clear if we see what else is happening, what other miraculous happenings are occurring around this incident with the blind man. Recall that shortly before this, Jesus had healed the daughter of a Gentile woman, a Syrophenician, a woman who dared challenge him that even the dogs eat the crumbs under the table of the children (of God). Jesus freed the daughter from the demon

without even seeing the daughter, but from a distance and without even a word of incantation.

Jesus next healed a deaf and dumb man with a touch (again the saliva – was Jesus really a miner?), and that time only one touch was needed to cure two problems, and as the crowd proclaimed, “he causes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak!”

Immediately (this is Mark’s gospel, remember) follows the feeding of the multitude, where seven loaves and a few fishes become enough to feed thousands, with seven baskets left over. At Dalmanutha, the Pharisees demand a sign, and get a sigh. The disciples complain they have no bread, and Jesus asks them, “do you not yet understand?”

And then we have the blind man, needing two touches to see clearly, followed closely by Peter’s prophetic affirmation, “you are the Messiah!”

The answer to our question of whether or not Jesus needed a couple of tries to get it right with the blind man should be clear from this context. It is readily apparent that Jesus had all the power he needed to get it right the first time – so why then were two touches used?

I believe that the two touches in this incident provide us with a relevant paradigm for ourselves as individuals, and especially for the church today. I suspect everyone in this sanctuary would confess to having been touched by Jesus in some way – and not only touched but healed, to some extent. But, I would consider anyone here who would claim that that one touch was sufficient to make them perfect and not in need of another touch, to be themselves highly suspect! Every one of us would profess in faith to having been touched and at least partially healed by Jesus; every one of us would, I’m sure, humbly acknowledge that we too see “people, like trees walking”, see without perfect clarity; and all of us, I suspect, recognize there will come a day when at last we, having received a final touch, shall see, not through a glass darkly as Paul puts it, but with complete clarity the Glory of God.

And just as this paradigm applies to us as individuals, it applies to the church as a whole, and our particular branch of it called Presbyterianism. Do we need to be touched? Some would say we are a bit ‘teched’. Others would claim we need a good slap up alongside the head – not me, for that’s too violent a vision. But I do think we can learn

from this 'two touch' story of new vision. The church has also been touched by Jesus, but we are still fumbling and groping our way, not seeing clearly. We are in between touches, and that's OK as long as we don't make the mis-assumption that we've got it all clear and right.

And the evidence is pretty clear that we don't have it clear and right. The briefest look at statistics will reveal declines in total membership and attendance, and most of us can identify parts of our church body that are atrophying. But it is also true that there are parts of our church body that are healthy, and growing, and that provide us with some hope while we wander 'between touches'.

Now, I will go way out on a limb here and be bold enough to claim that the congregations that are suffering decline are doing so because they keep bumping into the trees, walking. I would say they are congregations who insist they don't need new glasses, who persist in "staying the course", and doing the "same old, same old." I believe it was Albert Einstein who said, "doing the same thing over and over, while expecting a different result, is the true definition of irrationality." The new sight offered by Jesus, as unclear as it is while we are living 'between touches', calls us to step out in adventurous change.

This is nothing new, either. I contend that the call to change is a consistent drumbeat in Scripture, beginning with the very scribing of the laws of physics and chemistry. "God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light." (Gen. 1:3), changing chaos into space and time as we know them, and declaring with a word a chain of events that would string out over millennia. That change would be the normal order of business became immediately clear. The emerging awareness of human beings and their ability to choose to obey God or to disobey in sin eventually ran rampant and provoked God into calling forth a leader, Noah, to shepherd a small group through a time of major transition effected by raging storms and inundating waters.

The call to Abram to "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1), set in motion a chain of faithful lineage that would be claimed as a starting point by three of the world's major religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The record fades for a while into a time of peace and prosperity in a foreign land.

However, everlasting peace and prosperity is not a major nor even a significant part of the ancient history of faith – even the details of that period of stability in Egypt have been lost to us. The events of the emergence from that period, however, form another of the defining moments in the record of God’s involvement with people, and of God’s calling people to lead them into and through change. The time of peace and prosperity had degenerated, as it so often does, into oppression and slavery, and the Exodus, that gripping saga not only of the Israelites escaping from that oppression and bondage but of a new covenant established between God and the people through Moses, became a key defining story for the Israelite people. The Exodus story of the flight from Egypt, the ‘burning bush’ encounter between Moses and God on Mount Horeb, the grumbling and disobedience of the people as they wandered in the wilderness slowly and not completely learning to trust God, is a wondrous example (indeed a profound prototype) of a ‘congregation’ wandering half-blind between touches.

Other leaders, in particular Joshua, would be called to lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land, but even there the record is one of constant change, of conflicts and battles and shifting allegiances and rebellions by the people against God. Even after they were ‘settled’ in the land, the troubles continued. From out of the people God called leaders to judge the people, women as well as men, and to lead them back into faithfulness.

A shift from Judges to Prophetic leaders, including Samuel and Saul, and then another major change into a defining kingdom under David and Solomon, but even that period of peace and prosperity soon ended with the erosion of the Kingdom of Israel. The downward transition continued through a series of invading conquerors, first the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, ultimately the Greeks and then the Romans.

Into this sad, tired, dispirited remnant of a conquered nation came Jesus, touching people as they had never been touched before, and offering the promise of eventual entry into the presence of God.

And change was still very much the central thrust of Jesus’ message. With a basic style of rabbinical teaching familiar to those who encountered him, but with a content that was completely new and different, Jesus challenged those who would follow his lead. “You say ...”, he would often begin, “but I tell you [differently]”, providing a new

yet not new way of understanding the depth of God's love for people, and the simple yet complex demand from God to be loved in turn.

The followers of Jesus, close disciples as well as thronging crowds, were all touched by Jesus, and yet they still groped their way half-blind through this new forest of people. Resurrection encounters, tongues of fire, speaking in tongues – the call of Saul who would become Paul the evangelizer and church planter, disputes over doctrine, these were all events that kept the early Church in a huge state of flux as the new community of faith wrestled with trying to understand the implications for their relationship with God and their relationships with each other.

This state of not seeing clearly continued unabated for centuries - first with the church as a persecuted sect, finally as the church being declared the official religion of a collapsing Roman Empire. The Church battled to keep the written Word as the darkness of illiteracy and ignorance spread across Europe, and then contended to recover territory lost to the military evangelism of the new Islam faith, and then wrestled with the problems of the Church and the State being blended into one as the Holy Roman Empire. While that union appeared to some as the perfect solution, to others it presented only a breeding ground for corruption and decay, ripe for reforming, and so the struggles of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation erupted. New technology began to influence theology and practice, as the Word of God could now be mechanically reproduced and distributed to the masses of people, not merely to the Masses in Cathedrals. Reason and rationality became not only the new watchwords but the latest in a series of attacks on the deeply held and deeply cherished beliefs of the Church, inverting the understanding of the universe and displacing people and our planet from being considered the very centre. Political and psychological sciences flourished, chipping away at yet more tenets and doctrines. A new and unprecedented age of ease and luxury provided a plethora of distractions to draw peoples' attentions away from centuries-old religious practices. And now, finally, the Ages of Reason and of Christendom and of established Church structures is being pushed aside with sobriquets such as 'Post-Modern', 'Post-Christendom', and 'Post-Denominational'.

Given this highly dynamic development of faith over many millennia; given the constant ebb and flow of religious understanding, thought and practice; given the paucity

of periods of stability, of peace and prosperity; and given an overwhelmingly consistent call in Scripture to change by the people of faith and the repeated calls by God to leaders to lead the people of faith into and through that change surely the Church would by now be primed and eagerly addressing the parallel questions of “what will change look like?”, “how should we change?”, and “who will lead us?”

Sadly, in many instances that is not the case and instead the response and reaction of the Church ranges from ignoring the need to change to digging in the heels and fighting the change at all cost. This is nothing new, nor is it restricted to Canadian Presbyterians! The problems are well documented in current literature, as in this from Michael Foss in his book *Power Surge*:

There is no denying it: ministry in the Protestant church at the beginning of the twenty-first century is difficult. A spirit of frustration and despair afflicts many of the church's finest leaders. What once worked no longer appears effective, and many who are charged with the leadership of God's people are at a loss as to what to do. Like a ship without a rudder, the church flounders in dangerous waters.

There is a vacuum of vision, of ideas and strategies with which to respond to the growing disparity between the life and ministry of the congregation and the real lives of people in our society. The connection between the faith of the church and the life of the people is strained to the breaking point, and harried pastors and lay leaders burn out at an alarming rate as they struggle to keep the church from losing all relevance in our postmodern world.

Foss goes on to develop an understanding that many congregations have slipped into what he calls “the membership model of doing ministry”, a model that “lingers as an adaptation of the village church system that existed in pre-modern western Europe.” He further claims that it is abundantly clear that the societal context in which the church operates has changed, and the church has adapted, although not necessarily favorably.

The changing cultural context, with its displacement of Christianity from the center of individual and community life to the periphery, has caused a

mutation in the membership model of the church. In the Protestant explosion of the 1950's, membership implied obligation. In today's cultural context, membership has come to imply prerogatives (or perks).

Anthony Robinson, in *Transforming Congregational Culture*, also speaks of “a seismic shift in the religious ecology of our society – the ending of one great era and the birth of a new one” that calls for significant change within the church. He outlines a progression from the 1960's to today as a shift from “obligation to motivation”, followed by an “erosion of trust and reliable authority”, which then in turn resulted in a shift through religious pluralism into what has been labeled as a ‘postmodern’ society, a society that has begun to discard the “trust in reason, progress, technology, and tolerance ([that were]the benchmarks of modernity).”

Jim Kitchens in *The Postmodern Parish* picks up this emerging term of ‘postmodern’, and points out the use of two other terms that have come into popular usage to describe the current shift in cultural context, namely ‘post-Christendom’ and ‘postdenominational’. Kitchens points out a significant danger in the church's reaction to these phenomena, claiming a corresponding erosion in ‘brand loyalty’:

The temptation to abandon core values is more likely to be evident in strategies that employ marketing categories to assess potential members' needs and then to custom-design ministries to meet those needs, regardless of whether those ministries embody the congregation's core values.

So, not only does the biblical narrative show God calling for people of faith to respond to their changing circumstances and to discover new locations and ways to exercise their faith, the current literature seems to be in considerable agreement that because the world in which the church lives and breathes has changed considerably over the past few decades, and indeed continues to change apace, that the church needs to change. There are of course numerous congregations who continue to live in denial of

the changing realities around them, but it is likely that the expression “continue to live” is at best temporary, for these congregations tend to not only be declining but struggling through their last breaths.

Now many within the church do recognize this imperative and the need for change, but there is considerable disagreement as to how to best respond. One popular approach that strongly reflects a ‘consumer culture’ response is the development of what has come to be called ‘contemporary’ worship. Ultimately, this only defers the problem, because what is ‘contemporary’ is defined by the surrounding culture, and the church is not called to follow, but to lead.

A second, often related approach is a building of spiritual enthusiasm, manifested in revival meetings, ‘Renewal’ movements, and other charismatic expressions intended to deepen faith and rebuild waning congregations. Now I’m all for enthusiasm, and certainly in favour of spirituality, but in many ways this approach reveals a variation of the ‘consumer driven’ approach.

At perhaps the other end of a scale are more business-like approaches to addressing the problems of declining church membership and vitality. One example would be the use of various forms of psychological techniques to discover and address problems within the ‘emotional system’ of a congregation – all useful ‘management’ techniques, perhaps, but not sufficient in my opinion to address the root issues.

While there is agreement that the exact nature of what an appropriate response to the call to change in the church will look like is not yet clear, there is some emerging agreement that we can identify some common characteristics, trends, approaches, and understandings. We are starting to be able to put names to the result: “intentional” or “practicing” congregations, the “emerging church”, the “missional church.” Milfred Minatrea picks up and uses that term “missional church” to describe the required change, noting that, “These congregations focus on God’s mission ... [and are] reproducing communities of authentic disciples, being equipped as missionaries sent by God, to live and proclaim His Kingdom in their world.” He goes on to point out a critical difference between “mission-minded” churches, those who “view their role as sending and supporting those who have been “called” to mission service”, and missional churches,

who by contrast “emphasize *being and doing* ... are *participative* ... perceive mission as *the essence of its existence*.”

While there is much wrestling with new terms and new concepts and new understandings in the literature, there is at the same time a coalescing consistency in the descriptions of how missional, emerging, or intentional churches implement their faith.

There appears to be some agreement in the literature that the process of becoming a missional congregation begins with an intentionality of purpose, of listening for the Holy Spirit, of seeking to hear and understand God’s will and mission for that particular congregation in that particular context. There is an emphasis on determining the ‘core values’ of the congregation so that new ministries can be quickly assessed as being or not being consistent with the mission of the congregation. There is also agreement on the importance of Christian formation, with the term ‘discipleship’ emerging with a renewed emphasis. Worship is seen as a vitally important practice that not only reinforces community but helps in the redirection of transformation. There is also agreement on the importance of good leadership being necessary to guide the process of becoming a missional church.

So, there is hope, and even joyful anticipation, for the church. All is not darkness, for we have been touched by Jesus, and we are partly healed. But we do also need to acknowledge, like the man at Bethsaida, that “that’s not quite it – yet”, that we too can see people, but only as trees, walking. We need to avoid being too eager to say, “Wow, I’ve been touched! – I can see clearly, now!” And we need to confess that until that moment when we will be touched for the last time, when we will finally see clearly the full Glory of God, we will have to continue to be open to being touched, and being changed, by Christ, our Lord, in whom we place our trust.