

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lord Jesus Christ, Your promise to us as You departed this earth was that You would send the Holy Spirit who would be to us a source of comfort and who would lead us into all truth. Therefore, in these moments of devotion and openness to Your word, by that same Spirit teach us all things, guide us into all truth, open unto us the scriptures and show us the things concerning Yourself and our Salvation in You. Amen.

Marks of the Caring Church - Service and Justice

(August 1, 2010. Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 49:1-12; Luke 12:13-21; Colossians 3:1-11. Wesley Memorial United Church, Moncton. 10:00.)

My late brother-in-law and I
went back to grad school
in the same year,
1983.

I was off to study Church History
and Theology
in Kentucky,
while he was in plant breeding
at Guelph.

I had a plan
with a finishing date,
since I went with a few yards
of research.

As my finishing date neared
he was still struggling
to find a thesis topic.

In conversation

we discovered the difference
between our programs.
Because I was analyzing changes
which had already happened
my research was static.
His comment was
in the spring I plant
and in the fall I harvest
and then I see what I have to work with.

WONDERING ABOUT THE FARMER

Farming has so many variables
that long range planning
is not part of the equation.
Thus when I read Jesus' parable today
I find myself
wondering about the rich farmer.
Because of an abundant harvest
he is all set to eat, drink, and be merry.
Such an attitude
is far from the realism
I have seen among farmers.

Also don't you love it
when a parable of Jesus
contradicts other parts of scripture.
The farmer in the parable is quoting scripture
when he says to eat drink and be merry.

And the model he is following
is that which Joseph recommended to Pharaoh.

At least
there appears to be contradiction.

The proverb quoted by the farmer
was for the entire community.
as the was the storage of grain
by Pharaoh.

One of the greatest teaching about abundance
in the scriptures
is that it is not for the individual
but for the community.

Thus the address by God
through Hosea
is not to individuals
but to the whole community.

The singular for God
refers to the entire community.

MARKS AND FRUIT

For the past weeks
we have been looking at
the marks of the caring church
as defined in the United Church of Canada
and how they related to
Robert Schnase's five practices.

Marks of the
Caring Church
Word
Sacrament
Pastoral Care
Christian Education
Service/Justice

Five Practices of
Fruitful Congregations
Radical Hospitality
Passionate Worship
Intentional Faith Development
Risk-Taking Mission & Service
Extravagant Generosity

We began with looking as Word
as more than constitutional definer
but as that
which challenges us
to life of faith
expressed in passionate worship.

Then we saw how Pastoral Care
related to the practice of radical hospitality.

We looked at sacraments
and how they reflected the real presence of God in our lives
as an expression of passionate worship
and God's extravagant generosity.

Last week we looked at Christian Education
and intentional development of faith.

Today I want to look at the mark
of the caring church
which many would consider
to be the mark of the United Church.

SERVICE -JUSTICE

There is an old joke
which appeared in the *United Church Observer*

about denominational symbols.

The punch line

for the United Church

was that our symbol

was the casserole dish.

This comes from the emphasis

on service

which is so much a part of our church life.

Service is so much

a part of our heritage

that a many years ago

the order of Deaconess was created

to recognize the need.

When ordination was opened to women

the order was changed to Deaconal Minister

and men joined it.

Thus this created two parts

to our order of ministry;

word, sacrament and pastoral care

and

education, service, and pastoral care.

Together

they reflect the five things

we say we do as church.

During the 1970s

our concept of service

developed to include justice.

This was our seeking

to apply

the teachings of the eighth century prophets

such as Hosea

to our world.

It becomes the driving force

of many of our decisions.

Sometimes it has led to mockery

such as the General Council

which made a resolution

about bottled water.

But quickly

we found ourselves in the lead

in a significant environmental issue.

Yet it is who we are.

I remember a number of years ago

a friend who was serving a union church

and thus attended two denominational annual meetings.

His comment was that

at the Maritime Conference

real issues for the contemporary world

were being discussed.

FRUIT

For Schnase

this is risk taking mission and service.

But it also

involves extravagant generosity.

The latter is a commitment

of the church community

to be extravagant in giving.

For without it

many projects

of service and justice

will not happen.

Yet the lesson of Jesus' parable

is that our wealth

is about community.

What the farmer did was not wrong.

Whom he forgot,

the rest of community

was what was wrong with his action?

He was looking

to keep his abundance for him self.

Thus we see in the five practice

when truly a part of church life

enable to live

those five marks

which we say we are as a church.

Radical Hospitality

will enable to do
pastoral care
not just as a task
but to make us
a community of God's.

Passionate Worship

will enable
Word to transform and inspire us,
making the Sacraments
celebrations of God's presence.

Intentional Faith Development

will help us grow
so our faith tomorrow
leads us into the future.

Risk-Taking Mission & Service

means we are truly
seeing the world as God sees it
and acting as God would.

Extravagant Generosity

is required if we are to be able to do
any of the above,
otherwise
it is a dream
which has not become real.