

THE WINDOW AT WESLEY

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
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Like many of you, last Sunday afternoon I found myself sitting in a pew at Wesley United Church, on the corner of Cameron and St. George. There wasn't an empty seat in the entire church, including the balcony, and it truly was a moment of celebration in the life of the United Church of Canada in Moncton as we lifted up to God 170 years of ministry of the Wesley congregation, in and to this city and the world beyond.

Psalm 139 mentions that God's thoughts are more than the sand, which is a way of saying they are uncountable. So too with Wesley's ministry in Moncton. We simply cannot count the souls who have been ministered to by that congregation, and so I found myself last Sunday giving thanks for that ministry in this place. The Rev. Paul Cumming and his wife Rosemary sat in the pew in front of me. Paul is a former minister of that congregation who was there for (I believe) twelve years. I asked him how he was feeling, to which he responded that the day was very emotional. And it was. Whether it was the testimonials from congregants or the soaring and uplifting choir music, all of us couldn't help but feel that surely God was in this place as we simply said 'thank you' to God.

Discipleship is about being part of a group. Any one of you kind souls sitting here this morning could either be at home, doing the much-needed laundry, or tucked neatly somewhere inside a coffee shop, or perhaps even at the Champlain mall, as far away from those pesky Christians as possible, as you do a bit of retail therapy instead of spiritual practice. But the fact that you are all here tells me something - that within the

group there is a gravitational pull to be together with people who believe in God, if only for at least once a week, in which we can proclaim things such as the last shall be first, and that the crooked things in life shall be made straight, and that death has no power over life, and that “the things you do to the least of these you do to me;” and for one hour this week, we lift those things up as being most important in our lives. We all want that.

But here’s the thing, I’d rather be part of a group of people who aren’t mainstream. I want to be part of a group of people who love Christ specifically because he welcomed people who weren’t loved because they were special, but who are special because they are loved by God.

Yesterday afternoon, I was going downtown to grab a coffee. In the alcove of the north door, I saw a man sitting with his back against the door, his hood up, and he was obviously in need. I walked by and said hello, and then I stopped and said, “Are you ok?” He said that he was, and I told him if he stayed there for 10 minutes I would be right back. So I got him a sandwich and a coffee, and to be honest I didn’t really have it in me to do much more than that. So, when I came back, he lit up and didn’t know how to thank me, and I felt ashamed because for a moment I did this out of my own guilt for not doing enough for people like him. And it was really cold. He asked me my name, and he told me his, and I said to him, “Renee, it’s pretty cold out here. Why don’t you come have your sandwich inside the church?”

And for some reason, your minister found himself spending an hour with a wounded creature of God over a sandwich and a coffee on a particularly cold day, and I have to tell you, that opened up my heart. Another human being looked me in the eyes and said, “People ask me to change so much that I don’t know who I am anymore.” Another human being looked me in the eyes and said that he didn’t want to spend the rest of his life trying to find a life.

So much of what we do and who we are is usually based on trying to draw people in, when in fact, yesterday I found myself drawn out to someone else. And he made a lot of sense.

Jesus' favourite people in the world weren't clergy with two degrees. As Rachel Held Evans says, "Jesus' favourite people weren't cool. They were mostly sinners, misfits, outcasts, weirdos, poor people, sick people, and crazy people." She continues, "Some of us wear our brokenness on the inside, others on the outside. But we're all broken. We're all un-cool. We're all in need of a Savior."

I have to give a lot of you a lot of credit. Not all of you are long-standing church people. In fact, quite a few of you are relatively new to the church. You find yourself here week after week, or a few Sundays a month, or at random times depending on work and schedules, and each time you come back you are in search of a way to follow Jesus. You either come alone, or with your partner, or you bring your children, and you are faithful to this community in ways for which I am forever grateful. Discipleship is about remaining with Jesus for a time, and then proclaiming him from a deeper perspective from being in relationship with him and those who gather around him. Like Philip and Nathanael, all of us are all looking for something. And when we follow Jesus, he promises, "You will see far greater things."

"God is always calling on us to do the impossible. But we may think the impossible is some kind of heroic, Olympian feat, balancing on a high wire or a balance beam, or walking on the water all by ourselves. But the impossible, in Jesus' view, seems to be much more a matter of being a part of a group." (Madeline L'Engle)

When Jesus called Nathanael, he was sitting under a fig tree. In Jewish literature from several centuries later, rabbis wrote that the best place to study scripture was under the fig tree. Jesus didn't have a multi-million dollar ad campaign focused

on the generational traits of those under 40, targeting the tribe that sits in Starbucks. But he did sense that Nathanael was looking for something. And Nathanael was. In all of his cynicism, he listens to his friend Philip who raves about Jesus of Nazareth. If Nathanael were to respond in today's language he might have said, "Cape Breton? Can anything good come out of Cape Breton?"

Speaking of discipleship, last Sunday, we heard the story of the Baptism of Jesus. Our resident curmudgeon and all around nice guy, Fred Plant, brought me a story from the book, "Rogues and Rascals: True Stories of Maritime Lives and Legends" written by Bob Kroll. In it is the story of an evangelist by the name of Mr. Coleman, "a remarkable soul-saver, who travelled through Queens County, New Brunswick in 1868. It is written that he achieved great success at Cambridge Narrows. On the morning appointed for the baptism, volunteers with axes chopped a channel about twelve feet out into the frozen lake, and then enlarged its outer end into what was called the Holy Hole. (I'm not making this up, I promise.) This hole in the ice was where the dipping of the recently saved took place as they were baptised in the Baptist tradition of full immersion. After the usual sermon and exhortation - a powerful one urging the unsaved into redemption - the Reverend Mr. Coleman led his congregation down to the holy hole. The first candidate was an elderly woman. Mr. Coleman led her into the water. It was bitterly cold, but the warmth of the Spirit seemed to cancel it out. He pronounced the blessing, and then dipped the woman. But in doing so, Rev. Coleman slipped and lost his footing and his grip on the old woman. The strong current swept the poor soul away under the ice, and she was lost from the world forever. The crowd on the bank gasped in horror, but Mr. Coleman turned to them in perfect composure. He raised his eyes to the heavens, and said, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Hand me another one."

Our baptism makes us disciples and followers of Jesus, not disciples of a church or followers of religion, but followers of the one who calls us by name and asks us to do things that are difficult so that we can create places and moments on this earth that can be called the kingdom of God. The truth is, we're all disciples. Jesus sees us sitting under a fig tree, sees something within us, and calls us to follow.

That's why we gather ourselves into the "church;" that's why we gather regularly for worship; that's why we come often to this table and why we begin at this font. When we come together as disciples, we remember how Jesus has helped us imagine and experience a God who is indeed with us, a God who is still speaking and still calling, and how Jesus called us to place our deepest trust in *that* God.

Because most church communities are now in survival mode, they are practicing what I think of as a "vampire ministry." A vampire ministry happens when a church that doesn't know how to connect with the world around it meets a new-comer to its community. Someone with new blood walks through the door for their first Sunday, we catch our breath, we casually walk over to them, welcome them, and sensing this new blood in our weary bones, our fangs come down and we ask ever-so-innocently, "Would you like to join the choir?"

A while back, Will Willimon, Dean of the Chapel down at Duke University, got a call from an upset parent, a VERY upset parent.

"I hold you personally responsible for this," he said.

"Me?" Will asked.

The father was hot, upset because his graduate-school bound daughter had just informed him that she was going to chuck it all ("throw it all away" was the way the father described it) and go do mission work with the Presbyterians in Haiti. "Isn't that absurd;" shouted the father," a B.S. degree in mechanical engineering from Duke, and she's going to dig ditches in Haiti."

"Well, I doubt that she's received much training in the Engineering Department here for that kind of work, but she's probably a fast learner and will probably get the hang of ditch-digging in a few months," Will said.

"Look," said the father, "this is no laughing matter. You are completely irresponsible to have encouraged her to do this. I hold you personally responsible," he said.

As the conversation went on, Dr. Willimon pointed out that the well-meaning, but obviously unprepared parents were the ones who had started this ball rolling. THEY were the ones who had her baptized, read Bible stories to her, took her to Sunday School, and let her go with the Presbyterian Youth Fellowship to ski in Vail. Will said, "You're the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me." His father said meekly, "But all we ever wanted her to be was a Presbyterian!"

There's a window front and centre at Wesley United that is a reproduction of a painting by William Holman Hunt, called, "Light of the World." It is a popular painting of Jesus preparing to knock at an over-grown, long-unopened door. In fact, we have the same window here at St. John's along the front wall of the church. According to the artist, "I painted the picture with what I thought, unworthy though I was, to be by Divine command, and not simply as a good subject. The door in the painting has no handle, and can therefore be opened only from the inside."

When it comes to discipleship, when it comes to gathering with a group like this one we call a church, and when there is a knocking at the door and Christ is calling us to something more, there's only one person who can open it: You.
