

Sermon Notes – June 24th, 2018
“State of Faith”
Brian Walton

On November 21st 2004 I stood in that pulpit and shared my last sermon as the settled minister of St. Martin’s United Church. The excitement of moving to new work at St. Paul’s Hospital was overshadowed by my grief at saying farewell to the people and spirit of St. Martin’s. Over time I adjusted to my new work, found satisfaction in teaching spiritual care and relished the regular work hours and personal freedoms that the position afforded. Yet, my spirit remained restless, aware that at some point I desired to return to my primary calling as a parish pastor. As retirement appeared on the horizon the urgency increased.

Some say that God has a sense of humour. It seemed more than ironic that as I was considering interim ministry at Biggar, or part-time ministry at Clavet, that St. Martin’s would call and invite me to return to a place and a people who had so richly blessed me. Thanks to the wonders of computer files I was able to locate the sermon I offered on that November Sunday in 2004. In it I named two significant ways in which the people and spirit of St. Martins had blessed me. The first was the relationships that had been formed over 15 years which so often conveyed to me the presence of God. The second blessing was that the congregation allowed me to be a leader who embraced the Biblical verse, “I believe, help my unbelief.” As I’m sure you have realized in the last ten

months, I continue to have as many questions about the life of faith and the reality of God than I have answers.

It has been a tremendous blessing for me to return to a ministry role here at St. Martin's for these past 10 months. I have, once again, experienced the God-power revealed in relationships with old friends and new acquaintances. I have once again been allowed, and even encouraged, to explore the edges of the Christian faith as we attempt to discern how the God-power is at work in the second decade of the 21st century. I have been particularly heartened by the various members of the Spiritual Conversation groups who have joined so enthusiastically into conversations about spirituality, Christianity and life. I want to say a heartfelt thank you to all of you this morning. This opportunity has been a blessing to me. You have been a blessing to me. Thank you.

As I re-read that old sermon I discovered that I had attempted to provide a kind of "state of the church" address – not so much a reflection on the "state of St. Martin's" or even the state of the United Church but rather some observations about the challenges and opportunities for those who choose to follow in the way of Jesus. One such observation is that the Christian way would become more and more a minority experience within the culture. The intervening 15 years has done nothing to dissuade me from that belief. You are an anomaly. We are an anomaly in the culture. As I observed in 2004:

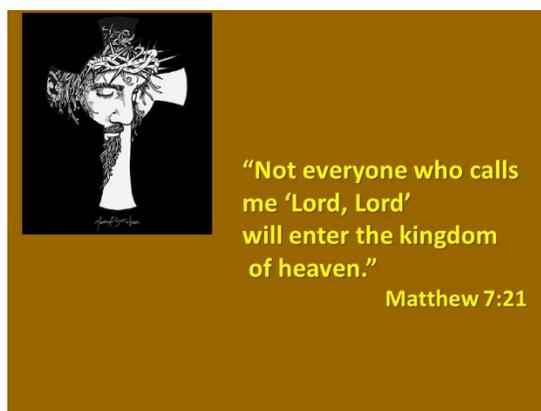
Being a minority is not easy – you stand out as different. Your friends don't understand why you have to miss a Sunday morning golf date or hockey game for church. They may not understand the money and time that you devote to Christian community. You might be thought of as a zealot, or old fashioned, or naïve.

Your belief in the way of Jesus might put you on a different side of a political debate, or a social issue, or a racist joke. Increasingly – if you wish to be part of the Christian church, the way of Jesus – you will likely stick out, perhaps be made fun of, and may even be shunned.
Walton, 2004

Earlier this year I referenced a book written by one of my first theology professors entitled, *The Reality of the Gospel and the Unreality of the Church*. In it he argued that it would be good when the church became de-institutionalized, when those who still called themselves “church” - with or without a building – will be more informed by the message of Christ than by the institution. Following in the “Way of Jesus” is not first and foremost a path to the local church building but rather a way of life devoted to radical love, justice and peace.

We would be foolish to think that God would rely on the Christian church alone to advance these values. We have allies in other religions and in other social movements who are equally committed to the path of radical love, justice and peace. Perhaps, as Christians, we will be more effective working from the sidelines than from a privileged place in the culture. When we aligned our mission with that of the dominant culture we easily lost sight of the Way of Jesus. The reality of residential schools is a painful indictment of what can happen when we mix cultural values with Christian ones.

We are currently witnessing a terrible example of mixing Christian and cultural values amongst our American neighbours. That segment of Christianity – often known as the evangelical right – still want to align their Christianity with the cultural values of tribalism. As a result, they mount great protests over abortion clinics while they turn a blind eye to the separation of children from their parents in detention centres. They continue to proclaim, “Jesus as Lord” while barring his Arab cousins from entering their country. They ignore Jesus’ plea to care for ‘the least among us’ with the tribal cry to ‘make America great again’. I cannot help but recall Jesus challenge to the religious right of his day when he said:



More to the point is this morning’s lectionary passage. St. Paul is writing a letter to the Christian community in Corinth, splintered as it was by division and pursuing the most charismatic, rather than the most faithful, leaders. St. Paul begins with a strong word of caution: “we urge you not to accept the grace of God in vain.” An interesting phrase – what does he mean, “Do not accept the grace of God in vain.” Modern scholars help us translate:

**We urge you not to accept
the grace of God in vain.**

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**failing to love one another is a
sign of accepting the grace of
God “in vain”**

Carla Works

**We urge you not to accept
the grace of God in vain.**

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**much passes for religion, for
Christianity, for spiritual success,
but Paul inspires us to keep
returning to the way of compassion
and vulnerability**

William Loader

One does not see much compassion in the incarceration of children. One does not see much vulnerability in the cry “make America great again.” And lest we think this is simply an American phenomenon let me remind you of that successful Saskatchewan business man whom I quoted last week. When queried about caring for the sick and dispossessed he unashamedly responded, “Well I don’t care about them.”

And so, there is a dividing line between those who hear the call to love their neighbour and those who hear the call to make themselves

great – or prosperous, or secure. I think it is easy for most of us in this Christian community to eschew the values of the religious right and to declare that “their Jesus” is not our Jesus. The challenge comes, however, in embracing our role to be the leaven in the bread and the yeast in the wine, to be a voice of love from the margins of the culture. Some of you may have heard of Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest and social reformer. He sends out a daily blog to all who are interested. On Tuesday he posed a question that made me uncomfortable:

... many of us try to find personal and individual freedom even as we remain inside a system of consumption ... most of us are on bended knee to and codependent with almost all public institutions ...

Richard Rohr is convinced that what we believe, what we commit our hearts to, will lead to actions that change the world. He left me wondering. Is it possible to care for the environment and drive my truck? Is it possible to love my neighbour and hold tightly to my pocket book? Is it possible to promote racial justice without committing to be political? Is it possible to follow Christ without pausing to pray, worship and ponder scripture? Rohr suggests that it is only by immersing ourselves in our spirituality that we will be able to be the leaven in society. To remain a vital church on the margins

of society we must be about those practices – such as prayer and meditation that sustain us - so that we can, in turn, live love into our culture.

Housed in a Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King challenged the complacency of a white church who mouthed Jesus' words but failed to live their faith into action

 <p>I have been disappointed with the white church and its leadership. I do not say that as one of those negative critics ... I say it as a minister of the gospel who loves the church, who was nurtured in its bosom,</p>	<p>... I had the strange feeling when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery that we would have the support of the white church ... few have been outright opponents ... but too many have been more cautious than courageous and in the midst of blatant injustices stand on the sidelines and merely mouth pious irrelevancies</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Martin Luther King Jr.</p>
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Martin Luther King was mad, but even more he was sad, not because of what the white churches did, but because of what they did not do. Some of you will have read the news item or heard the radio interview this week of a mother who was coming to understand and accept her child's understanding of their gender as 'binary' – neither male nor female. When asked who supported her, and her child, the mother was quick to report that the United Church did. The United Church who did this was not some vague institutional entity it was real people at a youth gathering, in a congregation, and in the coffee shop who were attempting to live the love of Jesus into life. This is the church who speaks into the dominant culture – who is first to apologize for colonialism and acts by setting up a healing fund; who is willing to apologize for gender based oppression and invites

people to become Affirming; who sees the need of displaced persons and commits a portion of its budget to refugees and resettlement; and who sends out emissaries into the world - to Grandmothers for Grandmothers, to Amnesty International, to the Joy Project in Africa, to Habitat for Humanity, to the Coldest Walk for homelessness, to the city's committee on Reconciliation, to Prairie Hospice and the list goes on. From within these walls the radical love of Jesus is seeded into the world.

Fifteen years from now St. Martin's Church may be a smaller version of itself. Fifteen years from now St. Martin's Church may not have a building, but if you (if we) invest ourselves in the gospel, we will have a life for we will continue to be called into the wilderness of tribalism to proclaim, "Comfort, comfort my people" on behalf of the God-power who is love who will never ultimately be silenced. Thanks be to the pioneers of our faith. Thanks be to our modern-day prophets. Thanks be to St. Martin's. Thanks be to God.

Amen.