

January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011

## **Come And See**

One of the insights that has emerged from the changes happening to the church in these days is that congregations can no longer simply put the words 'Everyone welcome' on their signs, or have greeters on a Sunday morning and expect that people from the neighbourhood will come walking through their doors. There is a great suspicion of the institutional church that has been developing for the last several decades - particularly in places like the 'Cascadia corridor' on the West Coast - which includes Vancouver. If you are like me - there are times when you hesitate to mention that you are a member of a church or going to a church event - because you become a bit suspect in people's eyes - or at the very least, they think you are a bit odd. And why is that, do you think? What do you think non-churched people assume when you mention the word 'church' that makes them so suspicious or dismissive? (*responses*)

In his book 'The Heart Of Christianity', published in 2003 - Marcus Borg, biblical scholar and professor at Oregon State University - describes how his university students have a uniformly negative image of Christianity. "*When I ask them to write a short essay on their impression of Christianity,*" says Borg, "*they consistently use five adjectives: Christians are literalistic, anti-intellectual, self-righteous, judgmental and bigoted.*"

I don't know about you - but I find myself feeling hurt, defensive - and somewhat resentful to be included in that sweeping judgement of the face of modern Christianity. I hope that I am **none** of those things - but I don't think any of us can deny that that **is** a common perception in the society in which we live by many - including some of our friends and neighbours. A book published in 2007 by David Kinnamen of the Barna Research group called 'UnChristian' - supports Borg's observations. His 3 year study documents how an overwhelming percentage of 16 - 29 year olds view Christians with hostility, resentment and disdain.

But these broadly and deeply negative views of Christians aren't just superficial stereotypes with no basis in reality, says Kinnaman. Nor are the critics only those who have had no contact with churches or Christians. It would be a tragic mistake, he argues, for believers to protest that outsider rage at Christians is simply a misperception. Rather, it is based upon their real experiences with today's Christians. According to his study, here are the percentages of people outside the church who think that the following words describe present-day Christianity:

- antihomosexual      91%
- judgmental        87%
- hypocritical        85%
- old fashioned       78%
- too political        75%
- out of touch with reality    72%

- insensitive to others       70%
- boring                       68%

Even making the adjustment that the research was done in the United States - these figures are astounding. "It would be hard to overestimate," says Kinnaman, "how firmly people reject - and feel rejected by - Christians."

How do you feel about that? Do you agree? (*responses*)

So, maybe Borg's insights were right. But it wasn't always this way.

In John's gospel this week, Jesus speaks for the first time. When Andrew and a friend asked Jesus where he was staying, Jesus said, "Come and see." And so they did - spending the whole day with Jesus. And they were so taken by that one day with Jesus that the first thing Andrew did, writes John - was to find his brother Peter and urge him to do the same thing - to come and see. And then the very next day, Philip grabbed Nathaniel and said to *him* the same - come and see. This was the unlikely beginnings of an improbable movement. The gospels record how throngs of people were so captivated by the preaching, teaching and healing of Jesus that they did, in fact, 'come and see' for themselves. And based upon what they experienced with Jesus - their lives were radically changed.

After Jesus' death and resurrection - the community that emerged gained a reputation the exact opposite to the modern one documented by Kinnamen. Following the example of Jesus, the first Christians broke down social barriers. They disregarded religious taboos that judged people as ritually clean or unclean, worthy or unworthy, respectable or disrespecktable. They subverted social hierarchies of wealth, ethnicity, religion, and gender in favour of a radical egalitarianism before God and each other. As Paul was later to write in his letter to the Galatians, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" (3: 28) And Luke, writing in his Acts of the apostles, says that the first believers, "*enjoyed the favour of all the people.*" (Acts 2:47)

It kind of leaves you wondering how we can back to the 'garden of Eden' so to speak - doesn't it? And by that I don't mean how do we go back to a time when this Sunday School at West Point Grey has 600 children in it. Ask Eunice Williams, whose husband Dwight, was SS Superintendent for many years.

And I don't mean a time when there was a new church being built monthly on streetcorners across the country. And I don't mean a time when it was a rarity for a family *not* to go to church on a Sunday morning - when being a Christian was the cultural norm of our society and synonymous with being a Canadian.

I guess what I am asking myself - and all of us - is how do we become the kind of church that is more than a building - more than an institution? And how do we become Christians in the way that the early followers of Jesus were - recapturing the integrity, identity and compassion that makes others want to 'come and see' - rather than to view Christianity with suspicion. Because, ultimately, that is what is at the crux of our future -

not just determining how we are going to survive, or whether we can continue to maintain a beautiful - but aging building. What do people in this community know about us - from the way we are individually and as a church family? Do our neighbours who frequent Starbucks and Tim Hortons and Mix's bakery down the street - care if we continue to exist on the corner of 8<sup>th</sup> and Tolmie? Do we make a difference here for Christ's sake?

Teresa of Avila, writing in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century a letter to her nuns toward the end of her life, said:

*“Christ has no body now on earth but yours;  
no hands but yours,  
no feet but yours;  
Yours are the eyes through which to look  
our Christ's compassion to the world;  
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;  
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless now.”*

Maybe, as part of our discernment for our future in the coming weeks and months - we need to be asking ourselves and praying about the face of Christ we show to the community around us. For the last couple of years, I have dreamed about painting a mural on the outside wall of the CE building facing 8<sup>th</sup> Ave. that would depict in a visual way to the community - who we are as a church family and what it is that we believe.

What do you think that would look like? What are the important elements we would include? What are the faces that would be shown? What are the actions that would be portrayed? How could we say without words, *“Hey, look! God is alive. God is in our midst. And the Holy Spirit is at work in us and through us and for us - and even in spite of us. And we would love to have you join the journey with us.”* I would honestly be interested in knowing what you think - so I invite you to give some thought in the coming days to what the face of our life together might look like. And how this visual portrayal of our life together might invite others to 'come and see'. We might even learn a lot about ourselves - and what God's vision for us might be - in the process.