

## **What is Your Image of Church?** 2 Chronicles 6:1-11 and John 20:19-23

(Written by Eric Olfert, MC Sask; November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007)

Good morning everyone!

What Image or idea of the Church shapes and guides your faith walk?

Some of the reading I have been doing lately has been making me think new thoughts; challenging me to reassess who I am and how I work at being faithful to God. I would like to take some time this morning to try to share some of those challenges with you, to invite you to think with me about how we are called to be the church.

I feel like I'm following Jesus' lead here, as his favorite way of preaching, his parables, often used images to make people think.

Some time ago, Jack Suderman of Mennonite Church Canada suggested the image of the church being like a ship, a sailing ship, with big billowing sails, sailing on rough seas. The wind might be the Holy Spirit, giving us the power to move, to overcome the waves of life, to get to where we are to go.

We can play further with this picture. The stars might be God, always there to show us where we are and what the directions are, if we use our navigation instruments correctly. Jesus is our captain, perhaps... we can use our imaginations to elaborate and fill out the picture ourselves.

But if we look around in the world today - not so much in Saskatchewan I guess - many of the big old-time sailing ships are in permanent harbor. They are like big floating museums, people pay to visit them and marvel at them, to admire, to study, and are impressed with their past glory. These old ships are well maintained and spotlessly kept, but they don't go anywhere.

In today's petroleum powered, high tech world, sailing ships are considered outmoded, unreliable, quaint. They aren't really used anymore for 'real' work except in poor countries. They are used for entertainment, for sport, for nostalgia sometimes. They aren't often seen as the best way to get to where you want to go.

This ship image of church becomes a bit disturbing when you follow it through. Is the church like an old fashioned sailing ship in permanent harbor? Every ship absolutely needs to come into harbor from time to time; for repairs, restocking, unloading and loading of cargo, and to give the crew a rest, but a ship that never leaves harbor has become something other than a ship.

Another set of images of the church grew out of reading a paper by Leonard Hjalmarson, called 'Toward a Theology of Public Presence'.

He suggests that one image of church might be that it is like Solomon's temple. As we read in our Scripture reading from 2 Chronicles, King David gathered and Solomon used the finest gold, stones and wood to build a temple worthy of God. And if we had read the verses just before in chapter 5, we would have learned that when Solomon was finished his building project, a thick cloud of smoke entered the Holy of Holies, signaling that God had taken up residence there.

- Do we feel that God lives in our church building?
- Do we feel that our main faith 'job' is to invite people into church, because that is where they need to come to find God?
- Do you come to church to be in God's presence, to worship and praise God?
- Is church 'Holy Ground' to you?

Another image of church Hjalmarson suggests is one that pulls in a very different direction. He suggests that for some people the Church is more like a base-camp. A base camp is a place where mountain climbers, hunters, tree planters and other people working outdoors go out from and come back to for rest, refreshment, nourishment and re-equipment.

- Do you believe that God is present everywhere, including 'out there' on the mountain where you do your daily work?
- Do you feel that our job is to join God 'out there', to become a people who help in God's work of redeeming the world, a people who daily live out the Good News wherever they are?
- Do you see church as a place to get direction, rest, inspiration, nourishment and tools?
- Do you see the life and function of the church as Holy?

We will come back to these images and questions after I have introduced one more set of images, but I want to say right now that I don't think the choice needs to be or should be either/or. I believe strongly that the faithful life is a search for the right balance between the extremes suggested by these different images.

So; one last pair of images before we reflect a bit and try to sort out a more Biblical solution. In his 1973 book called Western Theology, Wes Seeliger, an Episcopalian (or Anglican) priest from Texas, suggested (with a bit of a chuckle) that he saw two kinds of churches around him. He used 'western' or cowboy imagery, and called them Settler Churches and Pioneer Churches.

Settler churches, he says, are concerned with settling down, with obeying the rules of the Mayor (God). Jesus is the tall blond and handsome 'hollywood' kind of Sheriff. His soft blue eyes and neatly trimmed beard make hearts flutter. The sheriff (Jesus) is sent by the Mayor (God) to enforce the rules. His job is to see that nothing disturbs the tranquility of Settler City. The town courthouse, in this image, is the church building. Its all about following the rules.

In the Pioneer Theology, the image is of a wagon train, the Trail Boss is God, and Jesus is the Scout. There's something special about the Scout. For some reason, he seems more alive than most folks. He always looks life straight in the eye and says YES! Nothing scares him.

The pioneers love and admire Jess, as they call him, but there's always something disturbing about his presence. You see, there's a settler hidden in even the bravest pioneer. This invisible settler within keeps whispering, "It ain't worth it, play it safe, turn back, I'm tired, I'm scared" ... Then comes Jess, and the pioneer is reminded of what he already knows: that life on the trail is LIFE. There ain't no other. All else is death. Jess shows the pioneers that the Trail Boss can be trusted in storm and sunshine. But the call to move out, come hell or high water, is always disturbing.... In this picture, we see the church as a covered wagon.

These images that have been making me think, and that I'm hoping are now making you think, tend, as I've said before, to paint an either/or picture. Either church is a museum ship in permanent harbor, or it is a ship sailing the ocean waves. Either church is a temple where you have to come to find God, or it is a base camp, concerned entirely with getting its workers out to work.

Either church is a solid courthouse concerned with security and rules, or it is a vulnerable covered wagon, always on the move.

Mighty fortress or exciting journey – which is the church?

A good question, but I don't think the best answer is one or the other. I think we need to have some of both. Even an ocean-going sailboat needs to return to harbor from time to time. Even in the base camp image we need to have a place to prepare, and a strong sense of God being there to prepare us. And finally even the pioneers need the settler's towns to buy supplies and prepare for the journey.

We need to keep the right balance, between having and using secure and holy ground that nurtures and strengthens us and remembering that, as Jess told the pioneers 'life on the trail is LIFE'.

Another model, again suggested by Jack Suderman, this time from Physics, which was my favorite subject in high school, and my favorite subject to teach as a teacher.

Let's say swinging these keys around my head like this is a healthy, sustainable system. After all this is basically the model of the sun and the planets, of the earth and the moon. It is a model that has creation's blessing.

This model depends on two forces to function. One is called centripetal force and it is the force the string puts on the keys. The keys need to always be pulled towards the center for this system to work. What happens if this force disappears? The keys fly off and bounce a few times and then things stop.

The other force is called centrifugal force in physics, and it is the force of the keys pulling on the string. It is the force that keeps the string tight. If it disappears, what happens? A string with no keys is very hard to swing and tends to be limp and purposeless.

The point is that Physics says for a key swinging system (or a planet circulating system) to be healthy, the centripetal force (the inward force) and the centrifugal force (the outward force) must be in balance. They must be equal for things to be healthy and sustainable.

In the case we are looking at, the inward forces are the work of being a community, of being a people of God, of caring for each other, inspiring each other, nurturing our faith, raising our children into faith, listening to God together, praising, worshiping, and equipping.

The outward forces are the call to join God out there in the world. To discover what God is doing and move up alongside. To witness, in word and deed. To be that demonstration plot of the Kingdom of God in the world around us.

If these forces are not in good equilibrium, we have a problem.

Let's come back in closing to our scripture reading from John. The disciples are in shock. Jesus is dead! They feel betrayed. They are afraid. And then Mary comes around telling strange and confusing stories about seeing Jesus alive. Confusion doesn't lift their despair and fear. Like any of us would, they look for a safe place. They lock themselves up in a house to safely share their misery.

As Seeliger suggests, all of us, even the stoutest pioneers, have a little settler in us. We all crave that security and safety. In crisis we all look for a safe refuge to crawl into.

But let's read verse 19;

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’”

Jesus came among the disciples and offered encouragement. He had long ago Called each one of them to a task. He had Equipped them through training and teaching and example.

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’

Calling, Equipping and now – Sending. The three functions of the church, according to Jack Suderman.

You remember Leonard Hjalmarson? He's the one I got the Temple vs Base camp images from. He suggests that the temple model is purely 'invitational'. It is about Calling, and maybe Equipping, but it is missing the Sending. He calls the base-camp model 'Incarnational'. Incarnational suggests that our job is to put flesh and bones on the Good News. We are to go 'out there' and live out our faith in our daily lives. The base-camp metaphor recognizes that the Calling and Equipping are in order to Send. They support the Sending agenda which is the reason for it all.

Another way of looking at it suggested by Jack Suderman is that God is at work out there in the world. We are called, Equipped and Sent to join God out there in the world. Called to join in on God's work.

MC Sask's vision phrase is another way of putting it. 'Christ Centered and Sent'.

And Jesus sends us, as he sent the disciples, with power:

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup>If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Our job is to overcome the fear and timidity that keeps us in harbor; that keeps our God and our faith locked in the temple; that makes fearful settlers of us when we need to be pioneers; to get our centrifugal forces in line with our centripetal ones.

I pray that I, and all of us, continue to respond to God's Sending with Jess's big YES!

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