

Going to church: 'What's the point?'

Tēnā koutou katoa, Ata mārie, mōrena

Well here I am, my first official sermon as a Pastor here at Leith.

HEALTH

You know, on several levels, it's very strange that I find myself standing here talking to you this morning. Many of you know well that, in terms of physical health, going back a couple of years, I've been very unwell. You know that I was diagnosed with lymphoma - a form of lymph & blood cancer - mid 2014. You know that from there I went through 9 months of fairlie intense chemotherapy.

And it was very much touch & go. After the first 3 months of chemo, they stopped it & said this doesn't appear to be working (blood transfusions). They took a bone marrow biopsy which confirmed that. I then started on a second form of chemotherapy (minor miracle, another story) which improved things greatly. But at the end of the 9 months, they looked at the BM & said the cancer is reduced, but still there & now that we've stopped all treatment, we expect you will deteriorate rapidly from here over the next few months.

But that hasn't happened. Through the grace of God, & **the prayers of many people & many of you**, & thru changes I've made to my life-style which is much healthier than before; & through many touches & interventions by God along the way (I'll share them with you sometime) - I've actually been getting progressively better & feeling stronger over these past 12 months.

"Has he been healed?" I have experienced much healing, & episodes of healing. I have some interesting stories to share, which i will share as the occasion arises. But I want to draw a distinction between being **healed & being cured**. That won't happen till Jesus returns. Even Lazarus got sick again. Cure awaits us when we get our new bodies & the time of the renewal of all things, but in the mean time we can experience healing, & we can be ministers of healing to those around us.

I do have less energy than I did pre-lymphoma, & I'm still in a rebuilding phase. I am now very deliberate about how I budget & spend my energy, & how I practice self-care, re-creation & rest.

I NEED YOU

In many ways I feel like my life & my health is emblematic or representative of the situation we all find ourselves in. **We are all fragile & vulnerable & mortal**. We are all chipped & a little damaged by life & in a recovery phase. We all need to be taking better care of ourselves & of each other. We are all wounded healers, or at least, that's what we are called to be. And so I stand before you as **a leader with a limp**. I will need your help to do this job. I well remember Geoff New saying 'the pastor enables the community grow & develop as he or she leads it. But at the same time the community also enables the pastor grow & develop as they minister to him' So I'm going to need you. We are going to need each other.

FULL CIRCLE

There's another reason that it's strange & unpredictable that I should be standing here this morning. Some of you have heard some of my testimony already, & I've shared how I grew up in a non-church going family & how I some how had become **a strident atheist** by my teenage years. Guess I had the makings of a preacher then, because I used to love getting into religious arguments with Christians, & I delighted in telling them how ridiculous & illogical their Christian faith was. But - during my 2nd year of study at Otago Uni here, I had a powerful encounter with Jesus, & an experience of being loved and accepted like I'd never known before, and everything changed. Now interestingly, the person that God worked through to do that, the guy who shared Jesus with me week after week & disciplined me in my early baby steps - was studying here at **Knox**, & training

to become a Presy minister. So, here I am & in some strange sort of way its almost a full-circle isn't it?

MANY DRIFTED AWAY

Now about that time, there was something of a move of the Spirit taking place on the campus. A number of people I knew, from totally agnostic or atheist back grounds became followers of Jesus. But now, as that cohort I was part of has moved into middle-age, many of them, who started off with such passion & hope & vision - while they may still have a faith, & may still be trying to follow Jesus - many of them, possibly the majority, have very little to do with "the church", any more. There came a time when they asked themselves that question "Going to church - what's the point?" And they couldn't come up with a convincing answer, & they drifted away.

A lot of thoughtful people have wrestled with this issue. Here in NZ, **Alan Jameison** (currently the pastor of SW Baptist) some years back interviewed dozens & dozens of people who used to be very committed & involved with evangelical & charismatic churches across NZ, but had pulled out & were no longer involved. From his research he wrote a book called 'Churchless Faith' - really worth reading. He found that some people left because something (or series of things) had left people feeling **hurt, or angry or deeply disappointed**. He also found that some people left, not so much because they were offended, but almost like they had **outgrown the narrowness** of their church or because they felt they had theological questions or spiritual questions that the church couldn't or wouldn't answer.

Based on my own experience & thinking - & discussions with plenty of people - I think there are **six main reasons** why people leave church (all related):

1. **Unloved.** They feel uncared for, & that its not really a community ("I stopped going for X weeks, & nobody even noticed, & nobody even made contact with me").
2. **Unvalued.** They couldn't find a significant role or a sense of being valued.
3. **Unsupported.** They didn't feel supported in their life outside church.
4. **Disillusioned.** They were disillusioned by 'the politics' (e.g power plays; conflict dealt with in unhealthy ways)
5. **Irrelevant.** What the church was doing & talking about just seemed so dis-connected from their 'other life' Monday to Saturday.
6. **Bored & Underwhelmed.** The church didn't seem involved or interested in the mission of Jesus in the world. 'Church' and 'Jesus' seemed disconnected.

I hope we can keep the conversations going over the coming days as we meet each other for coffee or get together in our various small groups.

And I could so easily have joined them. But there's a quote by a guy called Shane Claiborne which I really like, & he says "*I'm tired of being part of the generation that's always criticising the church. Instead I want to be part of the generation that changes the church*".

UNCARED FOR

But really, so many of these boil down to people feeling unloved & uncared for right? And we spend so much time training people & resourcing people to be theologically educated, when so many people, thats not what they need or are looking for. Its the old saying that '**people don't care how much you know, till they know how much you care**' That's true for people inside the church, & its true for people outside that we're trying to reach. Honestly, the world out there doesn't care how much we know about theology or ecclesiology or whatever. They want to know if we care & if we can actually show them what love is.

ACTS 2:42-47

We heard in our reading from Acts earlier a snap shot of what the church looked like in those heady early days not long after the first Pentecost. And in that passage their community was a

place of **teaching**: nearly everybody was a new convert, hungry & desperate to learn about Jesus & this outpouring of his Spirit - & so that small group of people who had been with Jesus for three years as his disciples now needed to pass on what it meant to follow Jesus, & what it meant to build a relationship with Jesus. This is what is meant by this phrase '**the Apostles teaching**'. They weren't passing on the Apostles creed, or the Nicene creed or some form of systematic theology - they were teaching what it meant to follow Jesus, and they were using the examples of their own lives, they were using Gospel stories in oral form, & they were using the OT Scriptures.

They were devoted to **fellowship**, that is, building relationships with one another; people were opening their homes & their tables to one another. Think about it - they had 3,000 new converts, mostly people who had come from far away & didn't have a place to stay, & now they had to figure out how to house & feed them, as well as teach them. So they were modelling the way of Jesus as well as talking about it. There was real coherence between the way they were living & the way they were taking - & that's a powerful combination.

They **broke bread together** & ate in one another's homes. And there is something deeply significant & deeply spiritual about eating together. These guys knew that open homes & open tables lead to open hearts & open souls, which leads to growth.

They were devoted to **prayer** - and God's house will be called a house of prayer - & if its not, then we will labour in vain to build it. Whether we know it or not, we are all caught-up in this immense spiritual battle, in which we will never win or even move forward, with-out prayer, and we need to sharpen up that side of our life together as well. And if you able to make it, before the service each Sunday, we will have a short sharp prayer time from 9.40 to 9.50 over there in that first class-room, praying for God's blessing & moving in our service. There's some folk who meet 6.30 am every Wednesday up at Malvern St too. If that's not the best time, suggest another in the box. But man, see need to mobilise more prayer if we want to see things happen.

We read that they were experiencing a sense of **awe & wonder as God moved** among them - now this is not something we can manufacture - but what do need to be is open, prayerful, willing & expectant. And if you cant be expectant, start with being hopeful.

We read that They were aware of **each others needs**, & willing to try & meet them. And if we are going to be aware of each others needs & to try & meet them, then we need to *know* each other. And thats not going to happen staring at the back of each others heads for 90 minutes once week. There's a limit to how much of it can happen over coffee after the service too. The only way it can happen is if all, or as many of us as is possible, are in relationship by being in small groups - home groups, life groups, mens groups, women groups - call them what you like - but that's the place where we can really start to build community with each other, & really get to know each other, become aware of each others needs, & try & meet those needs.

And finally, in **verse 47**, we read that they were **growing**, & that God was adding to their numbers. You know - if we can do this stuff, if we can start living like this too, people will want to join us.

NT IMAGES OF CHURCH

Now as we read through the New Testament trying to understand from that what this thing called church looks like, three images come to mind.

FAMILY

The first is, that we are a **family**. Brothers, sisters,

Now how does a healthy family operate? We **support each other**, we have each others backs, we rally around when someone is in need, or suffering, or unwell, or grieving; what else do healthy families do? They **eat together** - a lot. You know that the research on how we can build resilience in our children & prevent them going off the tracks as adolescents - you know one of the number one things we can do is? Eat dinner together **around a table** each night. Over a table you share, &

you listen. It goes wider than just family life too. You know since I've changed my diet, I base it a lot on this thing called the **Mediterranean Diet** - its of healthy fruit & veggies etc. Shown that those folk have lower rates of heart disease, cancer & so on. But some researchers are saying, its not just *what* they eat that makes them live longer, but *how* they eat. So many of their meals are shared by big extended families, multi-generational families eating & talking & sharing stories. They are not just meals but times of celebration or commiseration. And notice in the gospels how much of what **Jesus does & says** is set in the context of eating with people, sharing a meal? And notice that eating together here in the book of Acts is absolutely foundational to their growth as a community & to their relationships with one another. I'm actually convinced that **you can measure the health of a church or a Christian community** by how often the people in that community are eating together & are in & out of each others homes.

What else do families do really well? **They fight** - esp the kids (hairbrush). But here's the difference. Unhealthy families fight in ways that lead to destruction & break up. Healthy families learn to fight in a way that leads to **forgiveness, grace, learning & reconciliation** - even if it takes a while to get there. At some point down the track we'll look further at what it means to have a good fight, with healthy conflict resolution that leads to growth & greater health.

And of course healthy families have **fun together**, & they **laugh together** in good times & they **cry together** in sad times. But they do it together.

COMMUNITY

The second image is that we are a **community**. Do you know - & this is research based - that people who are part of a religious community or a committed church-goer live longer & with better health on average than non-religious folk? Because they tend to have more & deeper social relationships, & more support.

At its most basic, we casually talk about community as a bunch of people who happen to live in the same location (Sth Dn, Nth Dn). But when the Bible calls us to live in community, it means far more than that. The word the NT uses is **koinonia**, the word translated as **fellowship** in this passage from Acts. What we see in the NT is that churches were far more than simply congregations, they were communities of people sharing their lives together. Now this is aspirational for us. Its a high bar. Now that doesn't mean we all need to be living in the same house of the same location; nor am I'm not going to suggest that as from next week we all form a common purse & start pooling our possessions, as wonderful & chaotic an adventure as that might be. And in fact those kind of Christian communities have got a bad name because so often they've gone wrong & people have been damaged in them.

But this idea of deep community *is* Biblical, & this aspirational, & we do need to set our sights on being *more & more* a community to one another, & making the journey from being simply a **congregation to being a community**. That means more & more moving towards having a shared vision, a shared mission, & a shared struggle. And there is some evidence that would suggest that true community, & deep community is only forged through shared **struggle & shared suffering**. For example, it is said that Britain was never more of a real community than during WW2, at war, on rationed food, striving heroically together to overcome incredible odds, & to see good triumph over evil. Any parallels?

MISSION

Which brings me onto the 3rd image (motif) I want us to get hold of: **mission** - because if our only image of ourselves is that of being a family, or even of being a community, that can still allow us to be very inward looking. But we are family that has a cause & a reason to live that is **greater than ourselves**. We are a community that's been given a mission greater than our selves. You know that the children of Israel, the OT community of God was meant to be reaching beyond themselves - they were called to '*be a light to the gentiles, that they might bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth*'. But they didn't live up to that call, instead becoming self protective, insular & often self-

righteous. And so this call passed to us, the people of the Messiah, the followers of Jesus. This call to take the message of God's forgiveness & love to all people & all creation. The call to bring God's love to the least, the lost, the poor, the lonely - is now our call, our mandate - & **next week** in part two of this message I want to dig deeper into that & what it means for us to be **a community with a mission**.

APPLICATION

But for now, I want to suggest some concrete applications from all this - how we can let this word become flesh in our lives.

Romans 12:13 implores us to share with those of God's people who have needs, & to practice hospitality. I'd really like to see us have more shared meals together. Periodically every couple of months I think it'd be great if we had a '**soup & bread Sunday**' in which we are all (or as many of us as is possible) are either inviting someone to our house, or being invited to someone's house. If we call it 'soup & bread' Sunday that takes some of the pressure off that it has to be elaborate in any way. It doesn't have to be a burden for ybheperson hosting; it can be **pot-luck**, several people can bring some soup, & several people can bring some different types of bread. We can do more of the shared meals either here or up at Malvern St too.

You know, there is something healing about sharing food, & about making food for one another. That period of nine months when I was on **chemotherapy** when I was often stuck at home because I was very vulnerable to infection, & feeling washed out & exhausted - I was so blessed because you guys got together & organised a meal roster, & so many of you came up & dropped off food for me. And with the food you'd often say a few words of encouragement, & I got notes & reminders that people were praying for me. I'm sure it wasn't always easy in the midst of your busy lives - **but thank you**. On one level, it was a really terrible time for me, But on another level, it was really beautiful time, of feeling loved & prayed for & bourne up on the prayers of others. **It's one of the reasons I put my name forward** for this role, & its one of the reasons that I'm standing before you today, able to do this.

There's healing in being community; there's healing in sharing food. There are other people among us now who have real needs & who would be so blessed & if we could do meals for them as well. And if enough of us put our names down, then its probably only going to be one time in a month, or every second month. But the impact, in terms of people feeling loved, is huge. So if you are willing to put you name down as someone who can produce one meal for some one in our fellowship who's sick or maybe just had a baby or a bereavement - there's going to be a clip board over by the yellow ideas & inspiration box - or you can just put your name down on the insert in your newsletter, with the word 'meal', & pop it in the yellow box at the end of the service. Or if you have another inspired idea about who we can be build community & be more of a family towards one another, please do put that in as well.

Ok, we're going to finish now, & Richard & the team are going to lead us in our final time of worship together. But if anything has touched you from todays service, or provoked you, or confused you & want to talk about that & pray about that - myself & Gill Trebilco will be down here in this front bench at the end of the service & you're welcome to come up for prayer or to talk. Or if you feeling a bit shy about that - write it down & put it in the yellow box.

God Bless.