

Rideau Park United, Ottawa
Sunday, July 23, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Philippians 2:1-11

Sermon: The Common Good

This week I was remembering back a decade or more, when we at Rideau Park were participating in a large social values survey, through the United Church of Canada, with the actual work done by Environics Research. The aim of the project was to give us an idea of what social values were alive and influential in our immediate community, presumably so we could then gear our marketing towards them more effectively.

So I took a good look at the top 10 out of 100 values: these were things like Cultural fusion and networking, flexibility in gender roles, the need for escape from stress and having ecological awareness. Some of the top ten fit pretty well with our congregation, then there were others like consumerism, and rejection of tradition, not so much.

After that I took a look at the bottom ten values: and there I found some things that are really important to us, aspects of our life as a community of faith that were not of high importance in the social values of the community around us. Social values like ritual, and spirituality, awareness of mortality and family life.

Wait a minute, I thought? Family life is in the bottom? I have always thought of this neighbourhood as being pretty family-friendly, so to me it didn't add up. When I took a look through the whole list of social values, however, I found that there were actually 2 sets of values that fell under the "family" category. One was called Primacy of the family – and it referred to the values that people place on the success and continuation of their family. The other was called Meaning of Life through Family, and this one was more general – seeking the betterment of all families, passing on significant values and ethics to children, cultivating strong roots.

Primacy of family – ensuring the success of your own family scored pretty high in the inventory, I think top 20. But meaning of family – taking care of all families as a way of strengthening the whole community – that was bottom 10.

I wasn't surprised to find religiosity and spirituality and rejection of authority at the bottom of the list, that fits with how many people perceive the church and religion in general. Faith communities are often perceived with either outright suspicion or apathy by the wider community around us.

But finding out that family wellness and community roots were at the bottom of the list? That was a shocker.

One of the things the United Church of Canada names in its future planning is this notion of the common good. Just as society has been growing more and more

individualistic in its values, so the church has been growing more and more Congregationalist and competitive.

To survive in the future, however, we are taking another look at what it means to cultivate the common good for all communities of faith, and not just our own congregation.

A colleague of mine described a congregation he knew well: a wealthy inner city (not Ottawa) congregation, that was experiencing the particular decline of city churches when families move out to the suburbs. Even with the best music, and the best preachers, and the best programming, even with large reserve and endowment funds, many of our inner city churches have had to close their doors or be sold, not only because of money, but mainly because of a lack of people.

So it was with this church. They increased their concerts, they did membership campaigns, they looked into property redevelopment yadda yadda yadda. The one bright light on their horizon was that a small “ethnic” non-English congregation, which also had ties to the United Church of Canada, had started up in the same city and was looking for a place to worship. And it was growing!

So the two congregations came to a rental agreement – the historic congregation moved their worship time a little earlier, and the ethnic congregation had a place to hold Sunday morning worship, and secure a bit of office space. Their congregation were residents from all over the city, so the inner city worked well for them, because most of them came to church on the bus. It should have been the perfect solution.

But the historic congregation kept raising the rent. And then they asked the other congregation not to use the kitchen on Sunday morning. And then they complained because the other group left musical instruments in the chancel.

And eventually the other congregation found somewhere else to put down roots and keep growing. And the historic church closed down – even though it had lots of money, there just wasn’t any life left.

Now, if we in the denomination are to start making “the common good” one of our priorities – how would that value inform a situation like this one? What if the rental arrangement was based on the hope that one day the new congregation might take over the ministry of the historic one? What if they had a rent-to-own agreement? What if the historic congregation saw its ministry as supporting the new one, and the new congregation made a commitment to respect and build on the rich history of ministry in that place? It’s easy to speculate and judge them because we aren’t talking about my church. What would it mean if Rideau Park started making the common good a priority in its future plans?

The apostle Paul wrote these words in his letter to the Philippian church: *Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead.*

Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.

That's from the translation by Eugene Peterson, called the Message. So his language is a little plainer, but the message is the same:

This was the mind of Christ Jesus – if you will call yourselves Christian for his name's sake, then you should have the same mind set: putting away your own privilege and helping one another is what Jesus would have you do.

Paul himself was imprisoned by this time, humbled in spite of the privilege of being a Roman citizen, because he sought the common good of the followers of Jesus. And so it struck home to him that sometimes it is worth giving something up in order to achieve something greater for all God's children: Again, these words are taken from his description of Jesus in the letter to the Philippians:

He (Jesus) had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what...Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death

For Paul, in prison, this vision of following just Jesus made sense. He wasn't advocating self-sacrifice or self-denial for no reason, instead just taking advantage of a hopeful situation when it arose – taking advantage not just for one's own success but for the maximization of the gospel and the strengthening of the whole Christian community.

I don't know whether it was because the apostle Paul travelled from place to place to place, but he held all the seedling communities that he had visited to be equal in God's sight. We know that he really loved the Philippians, that the Ephesians gave him a headache, that he had a second home with Lydia in Macedonia, and that he likely wanted to strangle the leaders at Corinth from time to time. But he didn't set those congregations up in competition, instead he told them to "empty themselves" so that they could help one another.

For a long time, the United Church has known that it has too many buildings, or that it has buildings that are too expensive for our members to support, or that it often has two or three buildings in the same neighbourhood, who compete for support.

The pandemic dealt a hard blow to many congregations across Canada, and many closed their doors for good. Unfortunately, those closures happened without any real planning or strategy about what the next steps might be. Just because the building closed, did that mean ministry stopped in the community? Did we pass resources on to another neighbouring congregation or even to another denomination to keep being the church in that place?

One of my colleagues speculated that maybe the pandemic would push us to be more "post-congregational". We created the South East Ottawa cluster in hopes of sharing

instead of comparing, in hope of embodying instead of imploding. It just might be that all of us will have to give something up in order to build up the whole church more effectively for the future.

On our fishy diagram on the bulletin, the common good is at the tail of the fish, not because it comes last, but because it provides the rudder, the steering and the correction we need to swim upstream right now.

Like that Environics survey, we know that we are different from the culture around us – we give when others take, we empty out when others hoard, we hope when others criticize. All this because we try to have in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, emptied out for love and creating new life out of every ending. Thanks be to God.