

CHURCH & CULTURE: 1. Our Mission Field

Genesis 12:1-5 John 4 selected verses

Did you know that Knox, our church home, is a trendsetter? It was news to me. This week Ann McClure passed onto me a December 27th article from the Sonoma Living section of the Press Democrat. With the help of some community folks the staff at the paper gazed into a crystal ball and came up with a Top Ten list of trends in 2010 and beyond in the food, wine, and hospitality business. With the recession's impact on so many lives, the trends reflect an ongoing yearning for comfort and value. The number one trend is a return to more casual restaurants with a cozy environment and a home-like feel. Connected with the number two trend is the news that the hot dog is making a big comeback because it takes people back to their childhood. Then there is the number seven trend that caught Ann's attention. It's all about more and more people growing their own food. The article reads "...for those who don't have the luxury of a yard, churches like Knox Presbyterian Church are carving out space for community gardens."

It's wonderful to be mentioned in the paper. It's good to know that we are a part of a growing movement that includes the "igrowsonoma" goal to make sure that there is a garden on every block and in every neighborhood in the county. Yes, the community garden will be a blessing to us and our neighborhood. Yes, it will help further our mission to feed the hungry. And as excited as I and others are, it is only a small part of our over-arching goal to touch our community with the gospel and to connect people to Jesus. Given our culture how we go about doing this is the huge challenge we face as a church, not just here at Knox but for every church in North America.

It would be really good news if one of the top trends of 2010 and beyond was people returning to and looking for a community of faith. Unfortunately, that is not the case. For example, a recent Gallup Poll (3/2/09) indicates that despite the recession there has been no increase in church attendance and no increase in the percentage of people who say that religion is important in their daily lives. Another Gallup study indicates that although 77% of Americans identify with some form of Christian religion, it is not an indication of how active an individual will be in the practice of that religion. In fact, the number of Americans who could have celebrated Easter last year as part of their religious identity was down significantly from where it was 50-60 years ago (4/9/09).

Friends, that's the cultural reality in which we find ourselves. Most North Americans don't belong to a church and most are looking for God elsewhere than the church. This is certainly true in Sonoma County. I've heard those in the know say that the citizens of Sonoma County are the least religiously affiliated people in the nation. That means that on any given weekend less than 4% of the citizens of Sonoma County worship at a local church, synagogue, or mosque. Sadly, this is part of our cultural reality. On a more positive note: Just as North America is the largest English speaking mission field in the world, Sonoma County and particularly southwest Santa Rosa is our mission field. As Jesus would say, "The fields are ripe for harvesting" (John 4:35).

Many, many people in this neighborhood as well as our friends, family members, co-workers, even your football or golf buddies and other like that, are hungry for spiritual meaning and sustenance, and we have something to offer them – Jesus, the Bread of Life, the Living Water. But our expectation is for them to come get it, to come knocking on our door, even though Jesus in his Great Commission says "Go and make disciples" (Matt. 28:18), go into the world, go to those right outside your doors, go and tell them about me. Instead of waiting for them to come to us, Jesus says, "Go!" Like God who told Abram to go and be a blessing to the nations, to those not of his own tribe, God calls us to go and be a blessing, to be Christ to the world.

Given the cultural reality of his own day, Jesus knows just how challenging it is for us to be the church in our own cultural context. In Jesus' day, AD30 or so, the Jews who worshiped only one God found the culture outside of Judaism to be a hostile environment. They were concerned that this Eastern world with its worship of numerous gods and different idols would have such an undue influence on them, that they devoted themselves to trying to preserve the faith by separating themselves from the world. They had what is called a "refuge mentality." Instead of engaging their culture and sharing their rich faith tradition with others, they sought refuge in their own community, either withdrawing from the culture or building higher and thicker walls as way to protect themselves from the culture.

The Jews of Jesus' day also understood the world to be divided into two types of people, Jewish and Gentile, and believed that it was best to keep the two separate. This was certainly the Pharisees' perspective who sought to preserve the law and traditions of Israel's patriarchs and preached strict obedience to Jewish law. What this meant is this:

If you were a gentile in AD 30 and wanted to know God, you would have to go to the synagogue or temple to get it. Or another way to say it: Because the Pharisees had created this separate culture and were unwilling to get out of their “church” and into people’s lives they were saying to those outside their community, “We’ve got God. If you want God, come and get it.” The disciples who grew up in this Pharisee culture, unknowingly perhaps, had adopted this “come and get it” mentality. This in part is the church culture that Jesus took on. In the familiar story of the woman at the well we see this being played out in a very subtle way.

Jesus is on a mission trip with his disciples. He is intent on bringing the good news of God’s love to the world (John 3:16), to all peoples, and he wants his disciples to bear witness to God’s love to the world as well, although they don’t get that because they have this “come and get it” mentality. On this particular mission trip, in order to get back home to Galilee they must pass through Samaria which is enemy territory to the disciples as Jews and Samaritans had been intense rivals for at least a century and a half. The Jews considered the Samaritans an alien folk, not even a nation or a people. So the disciples must have not been very happy when Jesus decided to stop and rest awhile at a patriarch’s well in enemy territory.

It’s not evident in listening to the gospel, but if you were to read the text yourself you would discover that verse 8 is bracketed with parentheses. After the Samaritan woman has come to draw water at the well, John tells us, oh, by the way “Jesus disciples had (already) gone to the city to buy food.” I had not really noticed this before but Reggie McNeal, an innovative church leader, offers an interesting interpretation of this parenthetical sentence. Because there was probably only one well-trod path or road between the city and the well, the disciples would have met the woman along the way. But even though they are on a mission trip they don’t engage her, they don’t stop and share with her how their lives have changed since they met Jesus. They don’t say, “Come and see this Jesus, he’s at the well.” Later Jesus says to them, “the fields are ripe for harvesting”, so with the Samaritan woman they had missed an opportunity to help transform her life with the good news of God’s love in one named Jesus.

Fortunately, the woman does meet Jesus at the well. Unlike the disciples he engages her in conversation. He asks for a drink of water and she receives from him living water, his very presence. She drinks deeply of it and her heart is filled to overflowing with the good news of God’s grace even for her, a woman who had been married five times and living now with another man.

By this time the disciples have returned and were astonished that Jesus was even speaking with a woman. Bubbling over with joy and wonder the woman doesn't seem concerned by their reaction. She leaves her water jar, goes back to the city and tells the people about Jesus. She is the missionary, the bearer of good news that Jesus had hoped his disciples would be.

Not long from now on a Tuesday evening we will gather as a community in conversation. We will take a look at our internal reality as a church: who we are, what are our challenges and our strengths, and what needs strengthened? We will undertake this examination not in a vacuum but in relation to our external reality, the culture in which we live and work and play. We will ask what are the opportunities and threats that await us in the world. This will be the first step in a strategic planning process that will give rise to 2 to 3 short terms goals and perhaps 2-3 long-term goals that we will set for ourselves as a congregation in order to renew our life and help sustain ministry into the future.

What I've shared with you in this message is way to prepare us for this important conversation, to say out loud for all of us, that given our culture these are challenging times for the church of Jesus Christ and we must be careful how we address these challenges. We can hunker down and pretend that the culture has not changed and be in denial about our own need to change or we can dare to engage people out there in the world where they are and whom God loves. We can continue to create a separate culture and say "come and get it" or we can be faithful to Jesus who says, "Go!" Go and bless people, enter into relationships with them. If we were not developing relationships with people we have no one to invite to worship. More importantly, if we are not getting out of the church and into peoples lives, loving them where they are and as they are, we are not providing opportunities for them to ask, "Why are you blessing me, what motivates you to care about me, about the community?" And thus we are not providing opportunities to answer: "I've met Jesus at the well. Jesus is the living water that quenches my spiritual thirst. Being a part of a worshiping and serving community is the way I drink deeply of Jesus, this living water. He is God's amazing gift to me and I want to pass on his grace.

And by the way, when we help get Jesus, God's grace into people's lives then we are the church not only on Sunday morning but every day; and that's the church people want to be a part of.

Friends, the fields are ripe for harvesting. Our mission field is right outside our church doors. Let us go and bless the world. For God's glory and praise. Amen.

