

John Docherty, June 22, 2014

“... and they held all things in common ...”

The Leader magazine proposes a seven-Sunday series of “visits” to early churches this Summer. They suggest a separate Sunday for each of the churches at Antioch, Colossae, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Rome.

The idea is that as we look at each of these churches, we get a glimpse into the life of the early church; their strengths, their challenges, their hopes. As the writer of the Acts of the Apostles describes what’s going on, or as Paul writes to a particular church to encourage them or address issues that have come up, we get a chance to reflect on what it means to be a faithful body of believers.

It’s a great idea, and to make things a little more interesting for the kids, they’ve prepared a template that lets us print out a passport for each child, to be stamped as the kids “visit” each community.

It’s a journey; a journey to different places, and to a different time.

Last year, when we were on a camping trip with our grandsons, we spent some of the time visiting Old Fort Henry in Kingston, and then Upper Canada Village on our way home.

The kids loved it.

Old Fort Henry they loved in part because it was like exploring a castle, and, in part, because they got to put on red wool tunics, hold wooden rifles, and be bossed about by a barking soldier.

Now I know as a good Mennonite interim pastor the militaristic side of this is a bit questionable. But I was on vacation. Besides, my own theory is that kids need to be accorded a little more slack than adults : they’re allowed to play with childish things, in the hope that they will outgrow some of them. To her credit, Mary-Lou is a little less comfortable with this theory than I am.

Upper Canada Village they loved because they got to watch an old-fashioned water wheel drive looms, and sawmills, and they got to play with pre-electronic games made out of wood. They even had an offer to milk a cow, though I don’t remember either of them actually trying.

They were in a different world.

A simpler world.

A world without the distractions of video games, cars, aeroplanes, etc.

I think many of us are drawn to a romanticized version of life without the busyness that comes with high speed travel, instantaneous communication with anyone anywhere in the world, concrete environments, plastic throw-away everything (including, sometimes, plastic throw-away relationships).

We're drawn to a picture of life that seems more 'natural'; more 'authentic'; more true to the 'essentials'.

It's one of the reasons Mary-Lou and I go camping every year, and one of the principal reasons we make sure that we get at least a week for a canoe trip. It gives us a chance to get back to simple survival mode, without most of the trappings of 'civilization'.

When we're on a canoe trip we're far more aware of the weather than we are in the city. When we're out on the water, we've got one eye on the sky (watching for signs of rain or rough weather), one eye on the state of the water (attentive to waves, wind, canoe stability), and (because we have multiple eyes) one eye on the shore (either looking for a camping site or looking for signs of wildlife).

We're more alert to our environment, and more responsive to its vagaries than we are when we can easily slip in somewhere out of the rain, or when the most dramatic thing about the wind is that we might lose our hat.

So "visiting" the early New Testament churches feels a little like a canoe trip to me.

We hope to be able to leave behind all the trappings of our modern religious world and recapture a taste of life in the church as it was meant to be.

I remember writing a final exam in one of the courses for my Bachelor of Theology degree. I forget the exact question, but one part of the exam asked us to describe some component or other of the "pristine" early church.

The "pristine" early church ...

Now, there are a couple of definitions of "pristine" that could apply here.

One definition is simply relating to something in its earliest, original condition, before some change modifies it in some way. It's not a value laden descriptive, but a simple statement of how something started.

The other definition is a bit more nuanced, and has to do with something that is in a pure state, uncorrupted, free from contamination, as opposed to the negative image of something that is no longer pristine, pure, uncontaminated.

My own assumption is that the reference to the “pristine” church was a reference to the earliest embodiment of the church, rather than a reference to the church in its “pure” state at the beginning of the Christian era.

But by either definition of “pristine”, the use of the word implies a tacit acknowledgement that the church has changed since those early days; that we have either simply evolved over time, without necessarily suggesting that this is a bad thing; or that we have deviated somehow from what was originally intended and that we, or our practices, have been corrupted over time.

On one level it seems perfectly reasonable to suppose that the church of today would be different from the church of the earliest period. No living organism remains static. There must be movement of some kind, or there is some form of death.

And yet, where the church is concerned, change is not always seen as a positive thing. For one thing, change in the context of the church implies that the thing to be changed is either no longer relevant; or that it is simply wrong.

And we who are the church generally prefer to think that we’ve got it right. We might be willing to admit that we don’t have a monopoly on the truth, but we tend to want to think that what truth we *do* have is reliable, that it *is true*.

If we didn’t believe that, we’d leave. We’d look for truth elsewhere.

And, of course, that’s exactly the history of the church. In my last message I spoke to the fragmentation and alienation that has described the church over the last two thousand years : the tendency to shut people out because they believed differently.

Or, conversely, and to be fair to various reformers, the tendency to leave behind a church that no longer embodied truth adequately, and to seek to re-create the model church of the New Testament on some level; to recover the truth that had been lost.

Each of the reform movements over the centuries has been an attempt to repair a perceived fault, and they have generally looked to the Bible and the early church to legitimize their reforms. Mind you, different groups have looked back for different things (and I know that what I am about to say is a gross over-simplification of church reformation history).

Luther and his ilk looked to recover Paul’s understanding of salvation by faith.

Knox looked to the structure of the early church and the leadership it drew from its elders.

Different evangelical movements have sought to reclaim an emphasis on the new life to be had in Christ, and the leaving behind of the “old self”.

Some have looked to the beginning of the second chapter of Acts, and the power that comes with the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

For myself, I look longingly at the passage we read from the end of the second chapter of Acts : “... And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all as any had need ...”

I look longingly at that passage, not so much because I’m aching to sell everything I have and make it available to a common purse here at MFM (... sorry ...), but because it paints a picture of a group of people who care about each other, and who take seriously their responsibility to each other. It’s a bit of an echo of the passage we read from Isaiah. *This*, I tell myself, is how Christians are supposed to act.

But, as Gary and Lydia have reminded us many times, this New Testament church, this “pristine” example of the Body of Christ, is not a “... church without spot or wrinkle ...”. It’s a gathering of people with their own flaws and warts.

They are sometimes sublimely generous with each other, as in this passage about holding everything in common, and they are sometimes sublimely cruel to each other.

Let’s move forward a little from chapter two of Acts, and look at the end of chapter four.

Acts 4:32-5:11

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. 'Ananias,' Peter asked, 'why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!' Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, 'Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.' And she said, 'Yes, that was the price.' Then Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.' Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things."

"And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things."

Well, yeah!?! I guess great fear would have seized me as well. I'm not sure that this is a church I would flock to, to join. This is another one of those passages that is hard to come to terms with.

In good Mennonite, "healthy communication", style, we would expect Paul to take Ananias to task for his deception. That's fair enough. We would expect him to acknowledge the deceit and give the man a chance to take ownership of his fault and either explain himself – tell them why he felt he needed to hold back some of the proceeds of his sale – or exercise an even clearer display of generosity by remitting the entire amount of the sale as others had done.

Peter *does* point out that Ananias and his wife are under no compunction to do anything at all – the land was their property, not the church's; the amount of the sale is theirs to do with as they will – they can give as much or as little as they like. So why doesn't he give the man a chance to own up and make things right, one way or the other?

No. We're not given any indication that Peter provided any space for discussion. He simply goes on the attack, and the man falls dead after being accused of lying to God.

This is bad enough, but the truly cruel part happens when Ananias' wife shows up.

Does Peter demonstrate any sign of remorse, or sympathy for a woman whose husband has just died?

Does he temper his approach at all?

Does he offer her a chance to relent, repent, and repair?

No. He basically lays a trap for her and comes very close to laying a curse on her.

She, too, dies, and is carried out to be buried.

I've tried to get my head around this incident. I've tried to come to some kind of understanding of how this could possibly be an event that brings any glory to God, or that is expressive of the message of Jesus as I understand it.

I can't do it.

Some of the commentators I read in preparation for this message try to find some kind of explanation that exonerates Peter. For example, he confronts Ananias and Sapphira with their deceit; they each die shortly after, though they don't drop dead immediately; the lapse of time involved is short enough that people link their death to the anger of Peter; people then attribute some kind of power to Peter and a kind of legend grows around him, even though his role is limited to exposing their lie.

Whether there is a more palatable explanation, I don't know. What is clear, however, is that the writer of Acts presents this story as we find it. And there is no guilt, or reproach, applied to Peter.

There are two aspects of this incident that leave me very troubled.

The first is the fact that, in spite of an incident that would have likely sent me running as fast as possible in the opposite direction, we are told a number of times that following this incident that (5:14) "... more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and of women ...", (6:1) "... the disciples were increasing in number ...", (6:7) "... and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem ...". I don't understand this, and I'm left shaking my head at a leader who has taken on a persona that seems so unlike the picture we have of Jesus in the gospels, and I'm left shaking my head at people who are drawn to these kinds of demonstrations of power.

The second thing that troubles me about this incident is that following it we hear nothing more of Christians selling all they had and holding all things in common. It simply drops out of sight and is never mentioned again as far as I'm aware.

This pristine early church is a volatile place. In some ways, it's a dangerous place. It's a group of people who are grappling with forces and passions that they seem to be wielding awkwardly at best.

I said near the beginning of this meditation that this journey to the early churches seems a little like a canoe trip to me.

I love canoe trips, and they are life-giving for me.

But we've learned over the years that canoe trips have their hazards.

We've avoided certain campsites because we were warned that bears were in the neighbourhood.

We're careful about where we draw our water.

We're cautious about the occasional rapids, and we portage around those that are clearly beyond our skill level.

We take precautions with our food, and hang the food bag high up, dangling from a tree limb to keep it away from animals.

We take with us equipment that increases our safety and comfort, but makes the journey less 'authentic' from a purely traditional perspective. We don't, for example cook over an open fire : we have a neat little stove with fuel. We sleep in a tent to keep the rain off and the bugs out. I'm embarrassed to admit we sleep on a foam pad to cushion our old bodies from the ground.

We're attentive to details, and we prepare ourselves for what's to come.

And I would suggest that our journey to the early churches this Summer should be approached with the same kind of careful attention to detail.

We should absolutely embrace the life-giving elements the journey will provide us, but we should be acutely aware of how this environment differs from our usual daily walk.

We should look for signs that we're heading in the right direction, but maybe we shouldn't be afraid to trust the perspective that can be gained from two thousand years of history.

And, finally, maybe we should keep one eye on the Heavens as we seek God's wisdom; one eye on the waters of time as we seek perspective; and one eye on the shore of life in 2014 to keep us well grounded.