

October 30, 2011: CELEBRATING WHAT GOD HAS DONE
Matthew 23:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13; Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37
Springwater Presbyterian Church

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When a parent says, "You don't need me!" it can mean, "What am I, chopped liver?" or it can mean, "Mission accomplished." The goal of parenting is to give children both roots *and* wings. We nurture our kids with time, energy and resources, and just when our efforts begin to bear fruit, they grow up and move out of the house. We want them to get their driver's license, balance their own checkbook, learn to use a washer and dryer, earn a living, make a contribution to society. We let go of the bicycle and watch the kid wobble down the street without training wheels. Our "You don't need me!" is triumphant. We drop them off at the dorm or their first apartment. Our "You don't need me!" comes with a lump in our throat. The pastor hears how well the worship service went without her, and her "You don't need me!" is a statement of pride and humility. When other plans fell through for last week, Springwater's worship was completely lay-led—clearly, an exhibition of growing faith and a sense of ownership for the ministry of the church. I am so proud.

This is perhaps why Paul uses parental imagery in 1 Thessalonians today, to reflect a relationship to a church he nurtured from its infancy. Unlike most families, in this one, it's the parent who "left home," to continue his missionary journeys. The plan all along was for the members to grow up and be the church once he left. No professional clergy, just ordinary people responsible for evangelism, worship, teaching, works of compassion. No building, no trustees, no endowment fund. No *Book of Order*, no session or presbytery councils, no committee structure, no institution. How could that be church?

I had breakfast with Brian Heron this week, to hear what he learned last summer on his 10-week, 3,000-mile bicycle journey. Brian's pilgrim errand was to listen for what the church still has to offer and what it has to learn. He found an enormous number of spiritual seekers, people who believe in the Divine Presence, but who see no need for church-as-we-now-know-it to show them how to experience it. They differ from the seekers he knew 20 years ago, in that this current cohort does not seek in isolation. They form their own spiritual *community*, because they don't see the church offering what they're looking for. They want community that's "theirs," with authenticity and integrity for *who they are*.

When you come to our house, you'll see pictures of Rick's and my family, souvenirs and mementos reflecting our history. You'll recognize the "home-ness" of our house, but it's not *your* home. That's how these spiritual seekers see church. They want a community that worships, searches for meaning and an experience of God, but they want it with gestures and traditions that are *theirs*. This doesn't reflect individualism so much as the high value placed on personal authority. The way people go to the doctor these days is not the same as it was 30 years ago. Back then, going to the doctor meant accepting physician recommendations unquestioningly. After all, the doctor was *the* medical authority. These days, health care authority is shifting to the patient. Patients are better informed (thanks to online research), they seek second and third opinions, they are more active in decision-making about their own health.

It's happening in the church, too. I'm on the presbytery's Vital and Growing Congregations Task Force. What we are finding is that even people who are consciously Christian and overtly Presbyterian are less interested in pastor-driven faith. They don't want to be spoon-fed or given program kits that presuppose a professional Christian's assistance. In vital and growing congregations, people explore faith together, perhaps with a mentor or

facilitator or spiritual director, but they are active, accountable, involved. They want to grow up.

It's the difference between being "tourists" and "seekers." Tourism doesn't allow for much substance or depth. The seekers Brian ran into were motivated by a need for authentic expression, but that's only a first step. It was *expression* they were talking about, not content. They aren't rejecting faith or even Christianity, they're questioning our expression of it, our lack of knowledge about it and commitment to it. Faith that firmly believes but doesn't know "what" it believes in isn't much faith. We may be pretty sure we're Christians, but if we don't know the stories that back it up and what they require of us, it's not much good. At the very least, we need to know how to look up those stories, to have the tools to explore and articulate what they mean to us. Otherwise, without content, all the authenticity in the world has nothing to say.

As the church-as-we-know-it-now, we get to be the memory for those seekers as well as for ourselves. This is what Jesus means when he speaks to the religious professionals and the minions they lead. Fewer tassels and obsession with "decently and in order," less kowtowing to religious professionals who "do faith" on behalf of others. Jesus' followers are supposed to humbly learn from the One True Teacher, the Christ. Ordinary constituents of the church are to be as actively engaged in learning as the leaders. It's Biblish for "Grow up!"

Old ways of "authority" are fading, and it's not just in the Jerusalem Temple or the doctor's office. Occupy Wall Street has become more than a traffic hindrance in our cities. Jim Wallis, of *Sojourner* magazine, addressed the Occupy Wall Street crowd through a blog—which is, of course, the way you would communicate with this socially networked un-movement. Today's Meditation Before Worship quotes from that blog. I bring this to your attention, because Wallis' blog comes out of Jesus' call to servant leadership and active participation by the rank-and-file. It reflects Paul's letter to the church commending their taking responsibility for practicing their faith. Nothing makes a pastor prouder than to see the congregation actively involved in decision-making about the ministry of their church. Unless it's to see them hungry to learn, eager to practice their faith all seven days of the week. As we celebrate "what God has done" during this stewardship season, let us also celebrate the ways we are "growing up" as a congregation and as individuals. Thanks be to God.