

Sunday, July 24,2016

Hebrews 10:24-25

Matthew 16:15-19

Ephesians 1-2

The Patriarchal Yet Changing Church

The one constant thing about the church- is that it is always changing. Even though one may or may not see the changes because some transitions take a lot of time but with those transitions the church changes from what it used to be to something different- not necessarily new.

We continue our summer series on different topics as suggested by some congregational members with today's question: Why is our church focused on the maleness of Christianity? And has this focus changed through time? To answer this question we must first reflect on the history of the established church or synagogue and look at the era in time into which Jesus came as the Word made flesh. World history indicates that the patriarchal system was fully in place for many years. Men were the ones who were educated, given authority, and served as leaders in all capacities. Women were treated as chattel and the means by which children were born and families came into existence. There was no such thing as feminism, women's rights and of course women were not educated but in the matters of domesticity or running a household.

In the biblical era the synagogues were male led by Pharisees and scribes; men who were educated and of the elite families. Women had little role to play in the established faith practices except for the fact that they were the teachers of the children and it was through women that the next generation were taught the fundamentals of faith—using the imagery of the time which was exclusive and masculine. And it was this way for generations of faithful people and the society in which they lived. The world and the established faith of the time had been changing and evolving yes, but people were also being oppressed and were seeking hope. But God our creator recognized the problem that people were turning away from him and that the time was right for the messiah, the promised one who could save them to enter.

Jesus was born- as a male child for as a man he would be listened to by the people. Jesus was able to speak, teach and heal in the courts of the temple which was acceptable. If the messiah had been born female- this would not have happened. But Jesus spoke to the people and they listened, they followed him as he traveled the country side and taught. The disciples were chosen by God to follow him who would later become key leaders in what would occur following Jesus ascension. These men witnessed miracles and heard Jesus speak. But out of fear for their own lives, they were not there as Jesus died. It was a friend and the women who were closest to him who prepared his body for burial. And it was the grieving women who went to anoint Jesus' body when they found the empty tomb. And it was the women who had to get the men to verify their story. Women played a key role in Jesus' life and ministry but the society and the era in which he lived did not accept women as the leaders that they were.

In Matthew 16 Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" – some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But what about you? Who do

you say I am? Simon Peter answered—You are the Christ the son of the living God. Jesus then blesses Simon and tells him that this was revealed to him by ‘my Father in heaven.’ He then states that you are Peter and on you- the rock I will build my church. You will be given the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Peter was given the keys to the kingdom but God, had placed in his understanding who Jesus was and is and it was upon Simon Peter that the church was established.

In this passage we see the relationship of Jesus with God the creator—son and father; why the maleness of God? Because the majority of those listening could relate to this kind of relationship- child to parent and for generations identifying God the creator as Father is out of respect and love that Jesus has for God the creator, His Father in heaven. And we also see that Peter is the one who receives Jesus’ blessing upon which to build the church. Yet the church is the body of Christ made up of people who have faith and believe.

We read in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (1:22) that God placed all things under Christ’s feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church—which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. But what is this church? The church is composed of fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In Christ, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Eph.2: 20-22).

So where did the maleness of the church come from? The society and the time and era in which it was formed dictated the need for patriarchy to be in charge. World history has influenced the changes within the church but it is only within the last 100-120 years that the church has seen changes in leadership, language and practise. This has been accomplished through the Protestant church with the United Church of Canada often leading in the changes. But primarily these changes have come because of the people who come to worship who question and encourage these changes.

Lydia Gruchy was serving in ministry in Saskatchewan doing the work of an ordained minister but the hierarchy of the church did not recognize her ministry until 1936. The Roman Catholic Church’ Vatican II discussions brought many changes in 1968 and at this time, church attendance had already peaked and the question of keeping the momentum was shared by all denominations. Women’s roles in the church both RC and United Church were changing- the need for lay people to take a more active role was emphasized. The church was definitely in flux; and so was communities in which these gatherings were taking place—wars abroad, crises close by, energy and pollution were issues that were addressed; Canadian parliament was debating over issues and members listened to the church people and its leaders.

Bible distribution was great- people were receiving God’s word in the Good News for Modern Man version and reading it, understanding the stories and seeking answers to questions. The language was easy to follow and reflected the times. People questioned authority and their faith and change arose in the church. But this also lead to the question of being inclusive in language. Ministers in training were told to be inclusive in their language. Discussions about sexual orientation and church leadership came to the forefront in 1988. Since then, further questions have arisen about the roles of groups of people within the church. The United Church has been reaching out to Aboriginal peoples and welcoming all to the table of Christ no matter our background. We continue to reach out to all people—

male, female, women and children and to all families however God has enabled families to come together. And we will continue to do so until all may freely and lovingly gather at Christ's table and become the body of Christ.

It is often traditions which we do not wish to let go of which leads us to further discussion and learning. The maleness of the church continues to change and evolve. But are we really wanting to let go of all of these ideas? Because we are a church family of different generations what is often shared is a blending of images from the past to the inclusivity of today. Children and youth do not need to be taught to be inclusive—they just do it. But those of previous generations are lifting up these ideas and opening their hearts and minds of what it means to be welcoming and inclusive; to be caring and sharing with all God's people. And in some cases, the idea of tradition and openness do come in conflict so we strive to reach out to all praying that the Spirit will touch the hearts of all. We continue to learn about those left on the margins, the oppressed and the hurting. And we know that God's Spirit will help, guide and direct us in these ever changing times now and in the years ahead.

Jesus placed upon Peter the responsibility of building his church. Through the hundreds of years which have followed generations of families have lived and called upon God in faith and they lived according to Christ's teachings. In our time and generation we have seen much change but it is slow and will continue to be slow as new generations comes to Christ and learn of his love for us all.

The writer to the Hebrews states (10:24-25, 35) we must not give up. We may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching. The day being referred to is the day when Christ will return. We are not to throw away our confidence as Christ's people, but to persevere so that when we have done the will of God we will receive what he has promised.

The church needs you to spur others to love and do good deeds; the church needs you to encourage others just as they are encouraging you to live as Christ taught. But we must be willing to listen to the Spirit in our midst, hear the history of what has occurred and then respond in faith. For it is by faith that we will receive Christ's embrace in our promised heavenly home. This is the message of Christ's love that we share and live out as Jesus' followers. Let us remember this as we reflect upon the changing church and Jesus as the one foundation which binds us together.

Let us pray:

Holy God of many names, we praise you and thank you for Jesus who came to live and die and rise again for the sake of our salvation. We thank you that through Peter your church was established and that though slowly, the church is always evolving and changing into you're your Spirit guides. Help us to grow and change as well. Help us to recognize the traditions of the past based on history and call us to do justice, love kindness and to truly walk humbly as Christ Jesus has taught. Encourage us not to give up but to be bold in acts of love and to grow in faith as we share with others Christ's message of hope. Hear us we pray O God. Amen.