

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Dreaming About Church"
Dr. J. Dent

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Third Sunday After Epiphany

When you mention the word "church," what is the first thing that comes to your mind? Most people think about buildings. But we know the church is the people. If we then think about church, we might remember some of the songs we sing like "I am the Church, You are the Church" or "The Church's One Foundation."

Unfortunately, many of us when we hear the word "church" think of the problems, difficulties and challenges facing the church today. And it is true that these things exist. The media loves to point out every fault and shortcoming in the church, while often not reflecting or showing the good side, the helping side, the positive contribution that the church and its leaders have in the community.

So I thought I'd take a page from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's list of speeches, since in part his holiday in the States came last Monday, and because I was thinking about how important it is to dream. I'm not simply talking about what the mind does during sleep, although that is an extensive conversation in itself. I'm talking about having a place to dream about your life and the things that are important to you. This brings up that speech, or sermon, "I have a dream" which was about integrating black and white people in the United States, particularly in the Southern states.

Hopefully since you are here today, you consider this place and this meeting, this service an important part of your life, at least to some degree. What are your dreams about the Church? What would you like the Church to look like? You know I'm not talking about buildings. Who would be there? What kind of activities would you see there? What would the atmosphere be like? What would we talk about? How would we know we are loved? How would we know we are on track with what we love about the Church?

I remember maybe it was a professor, I don't remember any more, who said to me that if I ever had a difficulty coming to the front of the church here and preaching or leading prayers, that I should imagine my greatest supporter(s) of all time sitting in the pews and smiling at me. Perhaps that sounds silly. But I received a great comfort from that thought. At times, I

still take a moment and think of my father (with all his faults) looking at me with a definite look of pride on his face, like he had when I graduated with my PhD at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa or when I sang a solo with my young people's choir in the Presbyterian Church in Walnut Creek, California.

I remember a woman from Nelson, BC, originally from Colorado, who had an infectious smile and a gift of encouragement who would also be in my dreamed about church. There would be my doctor friend who promised me he would take up his Christianity in a very serious way when he retired, and in fact he has just retired. This church would be very open and very caring, but also have lots of faults, because otherwise I wouldn't be very comfortable there. It would have people from other countries and some who don't speak English very well, but that's okay. There would be our friends from Sweden and Malta, Switzerland and some I met from the Philippines. Even my best friend from California who lives in Montana now would feel at home in this dream church. Our friend who is an English professor and her husband who teaches about how to share your faith would be there. There would be many very broken people who felt safe enough to share what they are going through, and still feel loved after they had shared, even more so, encouraged and nurtured by the act of listening and encouraging. A number would be there from our home congregation in Vancouver and a good few from Quebec. And there's no question there are some here from St. John's who would be in my dream church.

So what does your dream church look like? For me, it feels like home. I suppose it is a little taste of heaven. That's probably the last thing many of us would say about church, that it is a "little taste of heaven." But I think that was Paul's point of view in writing the Corinthians. None of the churches were more broken, or needier than the Corinthians. Yet Paul wrote them with a deep love and a hope for their future. That's why he meant what he said when he said every part of the body is needed. And when we are tempted to say someone here is not needed or expendable, then he would say that's like saying you need your eyes but not your nose, or you need your ears but not your hand. And extending this metaphor, Paul clearly teaches that if one part of the body is hurting, it makes sense that every part is hurting. It doesn't matter what part you bruise or cut or break, it all hurts the whole body. Even the smallest of injuries provokes a great deal of attention to that part. And we need to meditate on what that means for St.

David's. And we also need to meditate on what that means for getting along with all the other branches of the Church here in the city and beyond. Because Church Unity is something God gives us, not something we give ourselves. And yet we need to make practical that which God has achieved in Jesus Christ. So we have this one week in the year to think about these things. This is a time to ask forgiveness where we have spoken against our Christian brothers and sisters. This is a time to acknowledge our issues and challenges but in the same way that we acknowledge these in our natural families, with love and concern and a motivation to creatively address these issues as "ours," and not just "theirs." Tonight's service at West End Baptist on Topsail Road at 7 is one place to begin to think about such things.

In Ezra and Nehemiah we have the chronicles of the people of God having gone through total destruction, not one stone standing on another. This brings to mind Haiti today. But the people of God who were forcibly removed from their holy land, and brought to Babylon, and forced to sing one of those songs of Zion, probably one of the psalms, these people were not back in their own land. After seventy years or so of captivity, they were back seeing the rubble which used to be their Temple, the King's Palace, their city, their walls and gates, all broken down and burned. But as they went through the rubble, they found an old Bible, with at least the Torah in it, the first five books intact. And they read it aloud and understood why they had gone through so much. They had learned from God anew; just as we can do.

But rather than grieving and sorrowing over all that they had heard, Nehemiah the Governor encouraged them to celebrate the fact that they were together again, that they had a common mission together again. And that mission was based on the relationship to the Living God that they had. This is why he states so boldly, and probably also why I have seen the statement in a lively church congregation, just as we have our Scripture banner here, they had the words: "The joy of the Lord is your strength."

I hope you will draw some encouragement from this little exercise of dreaming about church, what it looks like, who's there, what we're doing, what we're known for, all those kinds of questions. I hope you have someone who cares enough about you to hear your dreaming, to hear your heart's cry for something more. I believe it is in all of us. It is there because the Lord has put it there. Unfortunately, we often don't take the time to

dream because we are too busy doing our jobs, our duties, and fitting in our recreation on the sides.

Take the time to dream. Take the time to share that dream.

As we positively see where we can go, and how many resources we have to get there, I hope we will receive the depth of encouragement that we are meant to experience, even as we often experience the opposite.

We can be so much more, and yet we pause to give thanks for all that God has done and by God's grace, what we have done.

Let us pray.