

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"An Audience of One (part two)"
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Proper 24

I gave a sermon last year with the same title, but this is not the same sermon, so I've entitled this one "An Audience of One (part two)." If someone can tell me the date I gave this sermon last year, within the next hour, I'll give the first person who tells me a little prize.

So often in the church we get sidetracked from what's supposed to be the main occupation of our hearts and minds. We get off focus of our mission which Jesus summarized very well: Love God and love one another. I believe this is the mission statement of every church, regardless of denomination or non-denomination.

And the first commandment is of the utmost priority. Loving God. Everything else gets warped and goes dysfunctional when we lose this centre of the spiritual target in our congregation, in our denomination, in the Church Universal. We often lose the centre when we worry.

Sometimes we worry about money. We think we don't have enough, given a newly almost doubled oil bill of about \$32,000 per year. So we worry about people giving enough. Sometimes congregational leaders worry about getting too much money. One of the seven or eight congregations I have served had a trust fund for which they had no clear purpose. And some of the leaders in that church worried that people wouldn't give when they knew the church had \$500,000 in a trust account for a rainy day where it wasn't possible to define when it was raining. This is not to say that you shouldn't remember our congregation in your wills. We appreciate the bequests have come in, and we look forward to the challenge of having too much money for our basic expenses. So far that is not the case.

Sometimes we worry about the state of the building, the lack of lots of parking, and properly using the space in the church throughout the week. We worry about those who have left for one reason or another. We worry about those who come for an occasion or a season, but that's it. We worry about attracting young people and retaining our own children's attention and affection. Some of us worry about where the denomination is going. We do

appreciate your prayers as we go to the Atlantic Synod in Nova Scotia this week. We worry and can worry about a lot of things.

Is there some area regarding our congregation that you worry about? That's something to reflect on before the Lord. But meanwhile, let me guess what you don't worry about. Please tell me after the service if I guessed wrongly.

Let me guess that you don't worry about us praying together enough as a congregation and as individuals. Prayer has sunk in the priorities of not only our congregation, but I might say most Christian congregations across Canada. It has become something that we know we should do privately, but we may or may not give much time to it. We know the church should be engaged in speaking with the Lord, and interceding for God's guidance, care and intervention, not only for our finances and our property and building, but also for the spiritual growth, life and outreach of our congregation.

Prayer is not only what Moses did in Exodus for the assurance of God's presence, guidance and glory. Prayer is the life line of Christian experience. When we speak with God, and encounter God in surprising ways, we are transformed. Such a transformation makes loving God and loving one another a mission statement that is a joy to fulfill, not just a duty.

I struggle to pray in a disciplined way. And here I am paid to pray, so to speak. I know many of us only have received instruction in prayer through our parents who taught us to "say our prayers" before we went to sleep, and perhaps said grace at the table. Others of us had rich devotional lives at home, but I am afraid that is quite rare. It is not my family background.

I'm not suggesting that we should begin to worry more about the fact that we don't have prayer at the centre of our congregational concerns. Instead, I believe we need to give a higher profile to prayer in the church. I would like to make it the theme of the Wednesday night group. We will be looking at resources to make prayer something less of a mystery and more of a daily practice. We will be looking at what the Scriptures teach us about prayer, and therefore what God thinks about the subject. We might all be surprised at the outcome. Consider whether you should give of your time to such a group. It's not too late to try something new.

Another area that we probably don't worry about our church is how much we read and understand Scripture corporately or individually. We read four

Scriptures every Sunday, I'm not referring to this. I'm referring to the general desire or lack of desire for both listening to God's Word and taking time to understand it.

Christians are a people of the Book. Our Presbyterian heritage says that we base our church on the Scriptures, which are the Word of God, and the only infallible rule of faith and manners...manners referring not just to pleasantries but our total conduct in life.

We know this and this is almost so basic that some might even be offended to hear it once again. But the point is not so much how important the Bible is theoretically, but rather how important we hold it in our private lives and in our lives together. How much time do we give to the reading and studying of Scripture? There are a few studies that have gone on for a while in this congregation on Wednesday or Thursday and Friday and Sunday. This is not to say we never give any time to this part of our congregational life. It is to say that we desperately need to give more. We need to cultivate a passion for both prayer and Scripture. Again, I am preaching to myself. Again, you might say I am paid to read and study Scripture. Nevertheless, disciplined reading and studying of Scripture does not come naturally to me. I need to force myself, which I suppose is one definition of discipline.

Both prayer and Scripture lead us back to the person of God. And as we know and love this person more, we then can concern ourselves with a concern that some have in the church, but not often a majority. That concern or worry is that we don't reach out enough.

I believe that appropriate outreach only happens as we have been filled up with the love and the compassion of the Lord. It is as we understand God better and know God better, then we can sense God's heart for caring for others. Then we can reach out to those who don't know God and express our own relationship with God as a way into God's family. Then we can reach out to those who are hurting and need help in terms of food and finances and care for their addictions and difficulties in life. Then we can become truly concerned for social justice and action out of God's concern for the poor, for inequities, for the relationships he calls us to care about.

For without the love relationship basis for doing these things, it all simply becomes religious rote activity. Religion can mean that which you do over

and over as opposed to that central relationship with the God who has given you life. We want the latter. But it cannot be legislated.

Once again this is about your choices, my choices.

It all comes back to what I've entitled the sermon. In our spiritual and religious activities, there is only one audience that matters. It is an audience of One.

If we want to have a depth of spiritual community, it will be in the recognition and agreement that our activities flow from our relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our community must grow in that One Community of God. There in that relationship resides the eternal results that we long and hope for.

In this extended season of Thanksgiving, we look to include the living God in every part of our day to day living. May I again suggest this year that we wisely look at the next festivities coming. All Hallow's Eve or Halloween used to be the looking forward to the celebration of the life we have together throughout history in God, the eve of All Saints. It has become more and more a celebration of death and horror. We see the front yards of ordinary folks becoming grave yards and occultic and demonic figures being celebrated, vampires, devils, witches, zombies and the like. I encourage Christians who do some festivities at the end of the month to be wise in what they choose to celebrate. The Reformation of the Church is one alternate possibility, which we will celebrate next Sunday. But as I said last year in more detail, I encourage you to not celebrate death and darkness.

As God draws us to Himself in prayer and Scripture and love, let us draw near to Him.

Let us pray.