

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Difference the Holy Spirit Makes"
Dr. J. Dent

May 31, 2009
Pentecost/Presentation Sunday

I suppose there isn't any better Sunday than Presentation Sunday to reflect a bit on what it takes to retain and gain our young people back in the Church. Over the years, many folks of all different ages have strongly stated that we need to retain and increase our youth and young adults in the Church. This is not an area of great success in our congregation, nor in the mainline denominations across our city and across Canada.

Some have suggested we offer more activities and venues for our children, youth and young adults to take in interesting and entertaining events and courses. And as we try to do so over the years, we hear time and time again that there is so little time available in our children's lives for one more activity. Or, perhaps more simply said, there is little time for another church activity. So we scratch our heads as leaders a bit, and look again for what can be done. We are currently looking to propose a part time job for a youth worker to encourage youth and young adults between this congregation and St. Andrew's. Funds for the position would come in part from recent bequests and presbytery funds. But what would such a person do, if they were met not with opposition, but rather a lack of enthusiasm toward a new activity for youth and young adults. And then the question gets put back on the rest of us, what can we do to encourage our children, youth and young adults to take up these new opportunities? What can we do as mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, grandparents and friends for these who seem to make it through the younger part of their life in the church, but then by the time High School is over, we see very little of them, if at all.

And if this seems a bit pessimistic, let's look even more generally at the whole church. Because it is not only the young people who seem to have other more important things to do on a Sunday morning, it is also the whole congregation. Now I hope you know you are the exception if you are here today listening and you have been here for weeks and weeks and months and months. I'm simply looking at attendance and desire for worship and learning more about our faith. What brings the spark, the life, the passion, the motivation to get us to worship and to grow in our faith?

Sometimes it is a crisis. We hear a loved one, or even our own doctor proclaim that our health and life status isn't what we expected. Sometimes such a crisis will lead us back to our faith, and to our spiritual roots.

Sometimes it is a change in our relationships. Maybe we have just had a baby. Or maybe we just married someone who is very involved in their faith and congregation. Or maybe we have just moved to a new city, and are wondering what our options are for worship, as there usually are lots of churches and styles of church to attend.

Sometimes it is not change, but what I've done for as long as I can remember. I'm just coming to church because that's what I've always done.

But I hope you know, and I hope I know that coming here this morning is not by chance. We didn't just happen to find our way here. We choose. And such choice is spurred by several contexts coming together all at once.

But let me talk to you about the one main context for why we choose to come to church. You can debate me on this one afterwards, if you would like to do so. In fact, last year, one of the parents asked me to preach a sermon on "Why would I ever want to go to church?" so that their children would get the message.

I'll give you the one reason, which in fact ties the Presentation Sunday theme to the Pentecost theme. Here it is. The only reason to go to church is that the Holy Spirit compels you to do so. The Holy Spirit compels you to do so. It is not the Minister, not the music, although those things help, not the prayers, not the multimedia presentation and stereophonic surround sound, although we're working on it. It is the Holy Spirit working on you, in you, to speak to your heart to compel to come join others to worship the Living God.

Tell me if I'm wrong about this. Many of us have been looking again at John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, the work he wrote as a twenty something year old in the 16th century and then edited it the rest of his life. He writes in the beginning of the work that the key to Christianity is the knowledge of God. And that knowledge, more than doctrine, more than all arguments and proofs, that knowledge of God, that knowing God comes from the witness of the Holy Spirit, there is no other stronger proof than the Holy Spirit compelling us to believe, to receive, to understand and to accept

what we know and believe about the Scriptures, Jesus, the Church, our faith, and everything of spiritual value. (Institutes, I, vii, 4)

So the key for retaining children, youth, and young adults, as well as retaining middle aged and senior adults is to invite the ministry of the Holy Spirit into the church anew, into individual lives. Because being here is much more a function of how we relate to God, even more than how we relate to one another. If our children, our youth, our middle aged and seniors and everyone else have received the ministry of the Holy Spirit, then we are compelled to continue in what we know to be right and good, better than sleeping in, better than whatever activity we might think we need to do.

Because in worship, we receive anew who we are, and what this life is about. This is why we need in Sunday School to direct the children to God, to know God, love God, more than any other value or experience or experiential goal, it is this meeting with the Holy Spirit who gives life.

That's what happened with the disciples who themselves had been with Jesus for at least three years. Some had known him for less, but they hadn't understood him, nor had they even been able to stay with Jesus, steady in their commitment to him. They ran away, when he was tortured to death. And it is easy to understand why they did.

But now Jesus had shown them what to do, and told them that the Holy Spirit will now lead them in the way they should go. So they waited in that upper room and the Holy Spirit gave them an unusual ability, the ability to speak in languages they had not learned, in order to share with people from across the face of the planet in their own languages.

Today we still have this gift of speaking in languages that we have not learned, but more important than this gift is the gift of speaking in the language or languages we have learned of what and who God is in our lives. The power of the Holy Spirit is first of all to believe and receive what Jesus said as true. Then it is to share that belief and conviction with others.

The Holy Spirit is the power behind the mission that every believer in Christ has. The Holy Spirit teaches us right from wrong, error from truth, convicting us of our rebellion against God and comforting us in our agreement with God. The Holy Spirit challenges us to put love and truth together in our hurting world.

So I won't go on and on today. I will simply say, "Ask the Holy Spirit to come fully into your life, to challenge you where God knows you need to be challenged and to comfort you where God knows you need to be comforted." Come in, Holy Spirit, have your way in this, your church. Have your way in my life. Have your way in our children's lives. Have your way in our city. Have your way in our families and neighborhoods. Have your way in our country and in our world. Come, Holy Spirit, Spirit of the Living God, come afresh upon us.

Let us pray.