

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Spiritual Eyesight"
Dr. J. Dent

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Proper 6/Communion Sunday

Having just returned from the 135th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, our annual national meeting of our denomination, I had a chance to reflect on what the church is. Most of us, if we scratch a bit below the surface, are not big fans of institutions. Some of us are quite anti-institutional even though our livelihoods and our families have benefited from the income and benefits received from some manner of institution, whether it be government, union or business.

Similarly, a lot of us have had run ins with the church as institution. It, like many institutions, doesn't seem to care about people but rather programmes, rules, and regulations more than people. I think this is why it is hard to warm up to institutions, and this is often compounded by the politics and power plays also associated with every human organization. So it's not a big surprise to me any more, when I tell people I have gone or am going to the week long General Assembly, that they react with, "Oh, I'm sorry you have to do that." It's something in line with the book entitled, "Death By Meetings."

But I quite enjoy the time. Now this may in part be a function of how odd I am, but I really like the people, even many of the people that I quite disagree with, in the doctrine and practice of ministry. We are a fascinating hodgepodge of individuals who love the Lord enough to give their lives to building up the church, this denomination, this institution that has gone on since 1875 across Canada. And it's certainly not institutional love that drives us. It is the love of the Lord and the love of each other. There may be some that lead the church as elders or Ministers just because that's all they know, and they only do it because it is familiar to them, but I doubt that's all there is to it. You do have to be motivated to want to be here, and want to experience what God wants for you here. Even more so is the case, in leading and serving here.

And that was part of the theme of the week. The parable of the mustard seed and the image of the tree in Colossians, chapter 2, which goes like this: Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and

overflowing with thankfulness. (Col. 2:6-7) And so we were encouraged Monday to Friday mornings in worship, in a variety of worship styles and worship music, to reflect on and experience this tree which is the church made up of you and me. The tree is rooted in Christ, and when that relationship is the primary glue that holds us together, we have strength and unity. That's why Paul mentions "having received Christ Jesus as Lord..." as the roots of the tree. But the tree is not just there for you and me.

It is also there for others. This is where we turn to the parable of the mustard seed. The Church is not seen as much today. Many see it is at best a social club for those religious thinkers who need such stuff. But if we have spiritual eyesight from the Lord, we will see the Church as a treasure of Jesus Christ, His bride, each of us being his most intimate possession, and all of us together as his most prized relationship. This is why we need to come and band together, and why we need each other. Because the person who says they are a Christian, but does not need, nor even like the Church is a contradiction. Not that it's difficult to understand why someone would say that. No, it's just that we have to see the Church through God's eyes, through Jesus' eyes and all that Jesus did to establish us. He gave all he could to establish this most prized possession and relationship, the community of believers called the Church, Greek *ecclesia*, called aside to serve.

And this tree which is rooted and formed, needs to keep growing, receiving new members and new families and new individuals of all kinds. For as the seed of faith grew, the mustard seed of trust, then the tree grew, and it became so large that the birds and the animals could enjoy its shelter and its protection. The Church is to be a place of love and shelter and protection for all. There are many little birds who need such a place. You and I need such a place.

This is not to say that you can do whatever you please in the church, or that there is no right or wrong, nor any real boundaries of truth and error. There are. But we need to be a place so full of love and care and compassion and hospitality that others will come to know the God we know by our actions, and not just our words. There will always be sinners in the church, always outcasts, misfits, people who appear to us to be strange and needy, different cultures, different languages, different looks, rich and poor, healthy and unhealthy, well-educated and not so well-educated. Yet God knows who the

little birds are. And God knows the tree which supports them. That tree needs care and fertilizing and watering from the life giving stream.

And so while others in the community may look at our church and all the other churches in town by how well or poorly designed or maintained they are as buildings, we know that we have to look with a different kind of eyesight than simply the physical plants, which are really only housing the true church, the people inside. We need eyes to see what God sees when God looks at the church. How well are we taking care of the tree and the birdies and animals that come in from outside?

Paul says that we have a whole new way of looking at people, when we look at them through the love of Christ. Just as we look at Jesus differently once we have given our lives to Him, so we look at people differently for whom Jesus has given His life. It is a new way of looking that doesn't depend on how well people present themselves, or what kind of make-up, clothes or haircuts they have. It depends on looking at what value Jesus has put upon them by dying for them. We should look at ourselves similarly, particularly if we are harsh in our self-judgments.

God was trying to teach His people these lessons long ago when Saul was king. It wasn't about how charismatic, or good-looking, or bright Saul was. It was about his heart for God. And Samuel was informed in a number of ways that Saul's heart did not belong to God, even though he had been God's leader. He chose to go against God, God's ways and God's will. And so now God was looking for a new leader. And he didn't choose who Samuel thought he would choose, but rather a kind of odd, nobody, who was still out in the pasture with the sheep. This is of course where the term "pastor" comes from, the under-shepherd of God's flock, probably a bit odd and often a nobody, but because God uses him or her, that person is of great value. Such is the church. So are you, as you come to the table of the Lord, remember how loved you are. Examine yourself to see that you are not going Saul's way, but rather longing to heed God's call and God's ways. Come to the Table, and experience the shade of God's tree in your life.

Let us pray.