

Spotlight on the NT Church: Signs of Church Vitality
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1 (with reference to 3:5 also)
A sermon preached for Plymouth Presbyterian Church,
St. Helens, Oregon on June 9, 2024
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Where do you look for the signs of a vital congregation?

Some would say look at their website: is it up to date? Is it color full? Is it catchy?

Some would say look at their parking lot: is it large? Is it full each Sunday? What kind of cars are parked there?

Some might say, "Look at the sign that stands in front of the church."

A few years ago First United Methodist Church in Abilene, Texas, bought a new sign with message on the sign could be changed each week. The purpose was to advertise the church to the thousands who passed by daily on a busy highway.

A decision was made to let each Sunday School class be responsible for the message on the sign for one week. The Bible Class was first. Their message read: "The Church Visitors Never Feel Like Strangers." The following week the slogan was produced by a young couples class. It read: "Our Church is Incomplete...It Needs You!" When the third week rolled around, the youth got their chance to produce the message. Their advertisement became very quickly the talk of the town. It said: "Best Little Church House in Texas!" Needless to say, the Administrative Board put a stop to further creativity regarding the sign.

There are some signs we don't want to see out front of a church, "Closed" or "For Sale" or "Under New Management".

A sign out front does not tell much about a church. Rather, the signs within the church tell the true story. St. Paul pointed to some of these signs in our scripture lesson for today. As I identify the signs of a vital church, I want you to ask a question of yourself: How can I be more a part of God is doing?

The first sign of a vital church is this:

It Is Powered By The Holy Spirit.

In verse 5 of chapter 3 Paul wrote: "Our competence is from God." Then in verse 7 of chapter 4 he added: "We have treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us."

Speaking of power, when I was a young adventurous child, I found out about electrical power when I located a bobby pin on floor one day. I picked it up and stuck it an electrical socket. Now,

let me tell you, I got a bang out of that. I saw the light. A ball of fire jumped out and grabbed me. So if I act strangely sometimes, you can just figure it's because of that bobby pin incident!

What God is doing is far bigger than sticking a bobby pin in an electrical socket.

Ernest Campbell, that great preacher who used to be at Riverside Church in New York, told one time of visiting the Metrodome in Minneapolis for a baseball game. He noted a strange phenomenon there. As one leaves, one feels a mighty push of propelling one toward the exits. It would require a physicist to explain this phenomenon. It has to do with the controlled pressure inside the dome clashing with the prevailing pressure outside. The outrush is strong and unmistakable.

We ought to feel a similar phenomenon in church. God is sending us out the door to love the ones that our community pushes to the side, those left behind, those who are rejected. If the winds of the Spirit are blowing inside the church, we will always be propelled out into the world for which Jesus died.

Remember our question at this point: How can I be more a part of God is doing?

The second sign of a vital church is this:

Its Trademark Is Love.

Love here does not mean liking someone. It is more a decision than an emotion. It means wanting what is best for every person because we have received the very best from Christ. St. Paul told the Corinthians that love is the greatest of all spiritual gifts. He wrote: "Faith, hope, and love abide, but the greatest of these is love."

From as far back as I can remember, I have been immersed in the church's love. But I never realized how deep that love was until I was on the receiving end of prayers made for me while I had an emergency appendectomy. I felt the clouds part as heaven drew near me. I know the power of prayer.

St. Paul urged the early church folks to show their love by giving each other a holy kiss. Well, kissing among friends seems to go over better in the Middle East than in the West. Here we prefer the holy hug. It is my pleasure to see the holy hugs that are shared here at Plymouth.

I have to compliment this congregation on your hugs. To see you greet each other after one week of absence is remarkable. Whether it's one week, or one month, or a year's absence, you demonstrate the love you have for each other with every hug. Keep it up.

A healthy hug is wonderful. Did you know that some persons don't get a single one all week except at church?

I remember teaching my very reserved father to hug. At first, it was stiff and restrained. Eventually, he warmed to the love shared by a healthy hug. Now, it is the standard greeting and parting method in my family.

The second vital sign is Love. The third sign of a vital church is this:

Its Message Is Jesus Christ.

In our text for today, chapter 4, verse 5, Paul wrote: "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord..."

The central core of our preaching is not Presbyterianism, though we are proud to be part of the Presbyterian Church USA. Our message is not the American Way of Life, though we are proud to be Americans. We preach Christ, crucified and risen, as the sure way to experience meaningful life here on earth and eternal life hereafter.

During Pride month we are highlighting the full gospel of God's love for all. Remember, "For God so loved the world...that whoever believes..."

- Some of our brothers and sisters of faith will change that beautiful statement to "God only loves some."

Jesus said the most important command is , "Love God with all your being, love your neighbor as you love yourself . In doing, the whole Law of God is accomplished. I have come to fulfill the Law."

- Some of our brothers and sister in the faith will add a list of approved ways to love God and neighbor including who you may or may not love.

How can I be more a part of God is doing?

As you are pushed out of this worship space by the Holy Spirit, friends, the signs of a vital church are easy to read. A vital church is powered by the Holy Spirit; its trademark is love; and its master is Jesus Christ. As long as people keep meeting the Master, in these pews, in our classrooms, in our home, and in our workplaces, this will be a vital church.