

Living Hope: Our Identity and Mission in Christ, Continued . . .

“Yielding to the Life of the Holy Spirit”
2021

Annual Synod, May

Bishop's Charge, Sunday afternoon

Yielding to the Life of the Spirit.

For seven straight Sundays in the season of Easter, we've heard a passage from that unique book in the bible, *The Acts of the Apostles*. Like the book of Genesis, it's a story of new beginnings. Jesus has lived, he's died, he's been raised from the dead, he's appeared to his disciples in many ways, and now he has ascended to the right hand of God the Father, the Creator of all. The book of *Acts* begins with the Ascension story and the people of Jesus waiting for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit.

Willie James Jennings, in his commentary on *Acts*, says that this isn't really about the birth of the church, as we sometimes say, it is more about how the disciples of Jesus were drawn into the disrupting presence of the Spirit of God. The stories show the willingness of God to invade their every day and every moment to send them, and lead them, down pathways they never imagined. *Acts* teaches how people of faith can yield to the Spirit—how people of faith can yield to the life and movement and disturbances of the Holy Spirit of God.

This implies at least two things. One, it is *possible* to come to know the Spirit, and is *possible* for us to follow in the way of the Spirit. Two, it

will require some discipline. Discipleship in the Spirit requires learning, practice, discipline.

By one definition, “to yield” to something or someone, is to give up possession of it, or your claim on it.

a: to surrender to the control of another: to hand over possession of something physically

b: to relinquish one's possession of a position of advantage or point of superiority

c: to submit (oneself) to another

In our case, it is to surrender our possession of, to relinquish our position over, to submit ourselves to . . . God. Yielding to the Spirit can be a beautiful thing.

Or more simply, as we travel around on foot, on bike, or in a car, we learn when to “give way” to others, to the flow, or to a force that may overpower us. And again, in the case at hand, the “other” is powerful, and unpredictable Holy Spirit. The penalty for failing to yield is the loss of relationship to the power that drives the universe and the frustrating inability to know and experience the fruits of the Spirit, which are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and other excellent things.

To yield to the Spirit is to actually believe in God the Spirit. To trust that the Holy Spirit is trustworthy. To know that this is not just any spirit, this is the same Spirit that moved over creation, that moved in the patriarchs and matriarchs, in the prophets, in Mary—by whom Jesus was born—the Word, now in the flesh, who sends us the Spirit.

This Holy Spirit is the very breath of God who brought you into existence. The same Spirit that helps you in your weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought—we do not know how to do anything as we ought—but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. This is the wind of God that powers the world. . . every molecule, every atom, every super-string of vibrating energy in the cosmos . . . the One who brings us real hope, and a real future.

So, we make-way for that Spirit. We do not want to yield to the spirit of the times, nor to the spirit of our own will, but rather to seek the direction of the Holy Spirit of God, the giver of life, the one who makes all things new.

Again, this is not as easy as it sounds, the movement of the Holy Spirit can be hard to see sometimes, it takes practice.

Some of you may know that my studies over the years have focussed on Christian Practices. What are the practices of the Christian church, how do they work, why do they work, and what do they tell us about this God in whom we live and move and have our being?

I believe that our inherited, in-culturated, incredible Christian practices—seasoned and shaped by the Anglican experience and its wisdom—are all we need right now as a central “strategy”. Practices like: Prayer. Fasting. Study. Worship. Confession. Forgiveness. Sabbath. Scripture. Sacraments. All of it leading us to love and serve the poor, the weak, the lost, in Christ’s name. God is found in these practices. Or better, God finds us in and through them. In every

generation we learn and re-learn them anew and we practice them together. These activities shape us, then we go deeper into them seeing that they become richer and richer as you go, and we find that we are drawn into a way of being in the world that allows us to live more fully and abundantly in Christ. It's one of the ways that God makes us "new".

If there is a way though all of "this", it will be by mediated by our participation in the simple, central, Christian activities that have proven, over time, to make disciples. I think that's what we need to focus on right now.

And, as I said last fall, we will need to make room, make time, make space for these practices to take on central importance in our life together. Which refers to that idea of "shifting the centre of gravity" of the activities around which our common life revolves.

I continue to believe that our **Strategic Goal**: is to shift the centre of gravity in our practices from an emphasis on *operations* to an emphasis on *renewal* and *new creation*, better revealing the marks of mission by becoming: a learning church, a just church, a diverse church, a new church.

The KEY: to be willing to go more deeply into the practices of the church, fully open to God's desire for us and for the world, focusing on Jesus and yielding to the life and movement of the Holy Spirit.

How we operate, how we function, is very important. So, the operations of our churches can be renewed, too, as we keep our eyes

on our primary mission. Most of what happens in our church happens locally, in the congregations and parishes and in your lives at home, at work, at play. I'm asking you to imagine ways to shift the centre of gravity there. But this Synod concerns itself also with the working of the Diocese of Huron as a whole. So, I'd like to focus now on some of the ways we will begin to renew operations and shift energy to Christian practices in our diocesan structures.

As I learn more about how we operate as a diocese, I am both grateful for the incredible work that people have done, and continue to do, and I'm recognizing that much of the current system or "platform" was designed to serve another time. Some of it still works very well. Some of it does not.

We need to go back in time a bit to see how much the things around us have changed. Think back to about 1950.

After the trauma of two World Wars, a corporate structure evolved fairly quickly to serve the dynamics of a stable, growing, post-war church. Coming out of the chaos and violence of war, and all that loss of life, and the realization that technology had "progressed" to the point that we could actually annihilate one another and the planet, there was a strong desire for stability, belonging, religious structures and, especially, peace. Not in everyone, but in most people.

The 1950's and 60's were a time of settling, and building, and expanding in the Diocese of Huron. Some of you lived through these

years and will remember it. As Canadian society settled into the post-war boom, the church thrived. Some of us think of those days as the “norm” for church—the golden era of church—but I don’t. When compared with two thousand years of Christian life, those years were not normal. They were an anomaly of sorts, a blip on the long timeline.

Most of our parents or grandparents in faith did this work in good faith according to their time. My grandfather was highly involved in this diocese over those years. He had been Diocesan Commissioner and then Secretary Treasurer of Huron when in 1955 he was elected to serve as suffragan bishop. Bishop Luxton’s vision at the time, and it would it have been mine too, I’m guessing, was to build the church out into every direction possible. They came together and built schools, houses of worship, parish halls, gyms, offices—and they gathered the people in.

They did it. It was an incredible accomplishment, and we are the inheritors of that. We have inherited incredible assets, spiritually and physically. However, some of these assets were built for a different time. A time of stability and growth when the church was one of the central places in society and in the neighbourhood. It was a buffer against anything that smelled like the chaos and death of a World War.

Today we do not live in a stable, monocultural, peaceful, growing church-society relationship. Some have spent the last forty years recognizing that and lamenting it. Some have even felt the burden of

responsibility for this so-called “decline” of the church. The leaders over the past forty or fifty years have been just as good or better than the leaders of the church in any other time. It’s just that the entire *milieu*, the environment, had changed and continues to change. More and more of the people in our churches do not recognize—and do not desire—the 1950-1970 Anglican Church of Southwestern Ontario. I’m an old guy—a grey-beard bishop —and I don’t remember that time. Never lived it. I was three years old when it was effectively over. Which, if that’s true, means that for fifty years we’ve been simultaneously living a kind-of-death and a kind-of-embryonic-developing-new way of living and being.

Some people call a season like this a *liminal* time. It comes from the Latin *limen*, meaning “threshold”. Something is ending and something else is beginning and the two exist overlapping and at the same time. Already, but not yet. It’s still the same faith, we still carry out the same practices in community, but we slowly begin to practice them in new ways and in new places. This is potentially transformative—for good or for ill. That’s the scary part. The outcome is not pre-determined.

This is why yielding to the power of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, is a good focus for today. We are in a time of following, of trying simply to keep up, not really seeing where we are going. We can make some educated guesses about our likely trajectories, but we are always stepping into an unknown future—we walk by faith, not by sight. At some point, even travelling in a fog, we decide that we are going to put it into gear and really get going with the Spirit. And as we follow the Spirit and watch for her movements, we keep up the work of

preparing ourselves, pruning our branches, and cultivating whatever seeds God sows into our soil.

Our “soil” is fertile in many places, thanks be to God, we have been given many assets. We have two kinds of assets. The first is people, wonderful people. In them we see the divine-human relationship coming to life in faith and action. The assembly gathered for worship. The disciples sent out into the world. People.

I’ll come back to this.

The second kind of asset is physical. We have land, buildings, vessels, the scriptures, water, bread and wine. All of these non-living physical assets are simply “media”. Each of them is a medium in which, or with which, God relates to us. We consider them holy, but they are only holy because God brings them to life as “a means to an end”. The “end” is you, me, us—the living—and our relationship with God.

Physical assets are the means by which God will reach out and embrace us. They are necessary. They are crucially important. We need to make sure that we are using the best media possible. We know that God will use any means necessary to love us. It’s the nature of God, who has no physical body, to kindle life into matter, to breathe life into clay—or whatever else is at hand—and to love the creature infinitely.

Right now, we are beginning pour some of our energies and focus and money into developing digital media spaces for communication, community building, and Christian formation. That’s another “land” we

can inhabit for the sake of the Gospel. Over the past fifteen months, we've seen that God makes good use of it for meeting, learning, seeing and hearing one another.

As we go, we will challenge ourselves to hold the physical assets lightly and to think of them as a beautiful, cherished, means to an end. Not the end itself. We also remember to hold the creaturely, living, assets closely. We will challenge ourselves to cherish the expansion of the human. We will challenge ourselves to grow disciples of Jesus. To expand the number of people who are good disciples and good disciple-makers. And only then to consider what physical structures we need to support that activity. We will remember that structures are meant to support and uphold us, as we are faithful. Not the other way around.

We are disciples now and therefore stewards so we will take great care in this as we are open to the Holy Spirit's leading.

Tomorrow morning, in the second half of this presentation, I will speak more about the stewardship of our resources and structures to serve the new dynamics of being church in our time.