Reimagining the Church – through the years. (April 21,2024)

1. We've visited this picture before: what should church look like? This is a question that is being asked all over the faith community, all over the world. Even here, where there is still money and jobs, prices have gone up so much that traditional churches are struggling. Insurance is being canceled. Banks are pulling back on loans to churches or non-profits. Contributors are being squeezed by the economy.

2. Brick and mortar is getting more and more expensive…and there are fewer and fewer funds to maintain them and keep them comfortable and up to safety standards.

3. We've had many "reset moments" over the last 2000 years and this is just another one. The question we need to ask is "What is church supposed to look like?" and, to make sure we understand what we are asking, perhaps we should expand the question to say "What should church look like, here, now, in our present reality?"

4. Ephesians 1:15-23. I was raised with the belief that the way we did church was just like the way they did church in the first century. That was completely wrong. In every century, in every culture, we have had to find a way to meet with each other and with Jesus…and it isn't always predictable or pretty.

5. Let's go to church (yes, we will use modern verbiage and not quibble about "doing church" or "going to church") around the time of the Apostle Paul. Can you imagine what THAT felt like?

6. There would be a lot of fear. The Romans see us as atheists because we are a weird subsegment of a larger, better known weird group. We may very well post a threat to the political peace of Rome. Many Jews are with us but a larger group are not and they don't think we are orthodox; they think we are heretics. This is a serious split in the faith community we've always known, always relied on.

7. Then…we hear the buzz: Paul is coming (by person or via letter). What will he say? Are we okay? Can he reassure us about our faith, our future, our current situation? (I'm often asked to reassure OSHC folk that we are okay)

8. The songs would be very different. They were usually sung by just one or two but, sometimes, they could all sing together. The singing would be chanted, memorized, often just scriptures set to a rhythmic chant.

9. The Lords Supper would have been a supper where food was shared along with memories of Jesus and prayers for each other. It was also where the people shared actual goods with those who needed them.

10. Oh…and it wasn't just on Sundays. It was on any day they could gather together. It wouldn't have been in a building, either. It could have been in a house, synagogue, or down by the river with sister Lydia.

11. It didn't look like us or sound like us but God approved it. God chooses to work with us in particular times, places and cultures. God locates Himself to particulars. This messes us up if we've taught that the church is supposed to look a certain way or that it always HAS looked the same.

12. Let's skip forward a thousand years to the time of St. Francis of Assisi. The church was very diverse in the first few centuries and we would be shocked at the variations of the early church in practice and in some beliefs. Then, we come upon a peasant whose life is mud, sickness, and back breaking work. He or she can't read, has no hope of a better life on earth, and knows that they were born without power and there is no option, no pathway to gaining any power over their own life. They will never matter.

13. And then…they enter a church, the only grand edifice they are allowed to enter. They see statues of those who lived pure, holy and courageous lives. They see the stories of the apostles, saints, and Christ in stained glass or frescoes. It was the only place to go if you wanted to formally worship the Lord.

14. That church, though heavily flawed in personnel, theology, and leaders was the avenue, the only avenue, people had to find peace with God and hope for the future. Here they heard the stories, hymns, and saw grace in stained glass.

15. Some people yearned for more. They formed parachurch groups called Orders. Some, like Francis, moved his worship outside the church building and used nature and animals as part of their worship, their living stained glass.

16. And God honored it. God met them inside and outside of the cathedral.

17. Let's climb in our time machine and go to the time of Martin Luther, a German monk, lawyer and theologian. He was also a Roman Catholic priest but he was troubled by what he heard and saw in his church.

18. What was worship like in the Protestant Reformation? In the early 1500s, worship consisted of sitting in a building and listening to long, long sermons – lasting several hours with, often, more than one delivered on Sunday. People were dressed up formally in the best clothes they had, even if they were patched or stained.

19. Most lessons were very deep, theologically, and required a LOT of attention. Hell, heaven, and the character and history of God were the main subjects. Songs were very formal (A Might Fortress is Our God or Holy, Holy, Holy), measured, infused with emotion and solid with doctrinal precision.

20. Church during the Reformation was serious business and nobody was allowed to forget it for a second. It was deadly business. Many lost their lives as the loyal Empire leaders, masquerading as Jesus's people, sought to purify the church from its corruption and false teaching, not by disenfranchising people but by eliminating them from humanity. They killed them in horrific ways. Those who claimed to follow the Prince of Peace took up swords against other believers.

21. Caught between rival Protestant armies and those of the Catholic Church and the Inquisition, the common people took religion seriously as it was a dark and dangerous thing.

22. Let's take our time machine to the earliest years of the 1800s. A lot of churches would look very familiar to those who lived 300 years

before. Sermons were very long and full of theological weight (but remember letters home from soldiers in the Civil War. People were far better educated and able to handle tough subjects. McGuffey readers, languages, logic, more).

23. Some things would have shocked us – even offended us. Separate doors for men and women who then had to sit on opposite sides. If blacks were allowed at all, they had to be in the balcony or sat on the ground outside, listening through the propped open windows. Religious divisions were so prevalent that most churches were small and rarely had a pastor come to speak so, when they did, worship went on for days, all day.

24. We would have been uncomfortable or outraged by the racism, the sexism, and the strange infiltrations politics, class, and color into the theology of that time. The angry preachers and their congregations (that teetered between boredom and terror) would have driven us away.

25. And we haven't flown over 80% of the landmass of the planet. The church in the days of the Russian Tsars, the Soviets, the church in China in the early 1900s, Japan in the 1700s, or in Africa before and after the arrival of explorers and missionaries and the massive disruptions caused by colonialism and the removal of resources.

26. Jesus knew that the church would have to change for each culture and time. He told his apostles that where two or three were gathered, he would be right there, in the midst of them. He spent zero time telling them how to sing, how to organize, how to build a building what day to take the Lord's Supper….not a word.

27. He told them that they were to agree with each other "along the way." He told us that when we agreed with each other, heaven agreed with us. (Matthew 18:19,20) Paul told Euodia and Syntche to agree with each other so that there would be harmony in the church…without ever indicating who was right or what the issue was!

28. Agreement was the issue. Peace was the issue. Sharing in love and joy and faith was the issue. If they agreed, Christ was with them and agreed as well.

29. We are not the church because we go to a building that has a name on it. We are not the church because we don't have a building. Buildings have nothing to do with it at this point in history (perhaps if we were illiterate serfs who needed stained glass windows to tell us the stories…).

30. We are the church because Christ has brought us in by blood, belief and baptism and because we have agreed to join with each other in order to praise Him. That joining can be online, in homes, in parks and, yes, in structures of any kind as long as we unite to remind each other who we are how we are called to live in the world in which we find ourselves.

31. We gather to heal each other's wounds, to remind ourselves that we don't dance to the consumerist tune, to a conformist song, or to the song of modern day politics and earthly rulers.

32. Through the ages, the church has emerged in different languages, cultures, cities, and worldviews but our mission remains the same: tell the story of Jesus, the Son of God, crucified and resurrected. Tell the world that there is an alternative to the communities the world offers us, a different way to live…to matter.

33. Ephesians 1:18-23.