
Jesus gave us the church: some assembly required
Martin Grove United Church
June 2, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Acts 1:1-11 and Luke 24:36-43, 50-53

I know, I know. You always expect the minister to read the Gospel story and the lay person to read the other reading, right? Why then did I just read Acts? Do you think there is some new tradition starting within the church? No. I decided to read the passage from Acts because I was honouring a different tradition, which is that I get the last reading. And in this case, Luke comes before Acts. Not only because Luke come before The book of Acts in the New Testament. But because the author we call “Luke” wrote both Luke and Acts. Reading Luke then Acts as we did today, we actually read the stories in the correct order. This little connector story between Luke and Acts describes the transition between the ministry of Jesus and the beginnings of the Christian church.

Christian tradition tells us that Jesus gave us the church. However, there are at least 2 bones I want to pick with that idea. For one thing, Jesus was not Christian, and in fact would never have even heard the word “Christian” in his lifetime. He may have created a new community, but there is no way that he imagined that community moving beyond the bounds of Judaism and becoming the largest religious community on the planet. We’ve talked about that point many times, so happily for you I won’t expand on that today.

The other bone I want to pick is that Jesus didn’t so much leave the disciples with the church, Jesus just leaves the disciples - period. Both Luke and Acts describe Jesus promising to send the spirit - which is great. But instead of Jesus hanging around to be part of the welcoming committee, Jesus just legs it. Which probably in part explains why there are so many different churches, so many different ideas of what Christian living should look like, so many different flavours of Christianity. If Jesus had actually created the church before he headed to heaven, we might have a lot more uniformity within Christianity, whereas today in fact we have very little. Globally, there is very little that all Christian groups agree on.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying whether Jesus being a little more proactive would have given us a better church or not. I'm just trying to figure out what actually happened based on the writings in the Bible. And the simple reality is that Jesus did not leave us the church. Jesus left us with some great ideas, the spirit, and the ultimate DIY project. Saying that Jesus left us the church is like handing someone an egg and some wheat and claiming that you have given them a chicken sandwich.

But there is at least one other possibility. What if Jesus did in fact leave the blueprints for a church (not as a Christian entity of course) but the disciples just didn't understand it. In the gospel of Mark - for example - the disciples consistently fail to get the point that Jesus is trying to make. What if Jesus tried to leave a blueprint but it was just not understood or appreciated in the moment because his ideas were just too radical.

During Jesus's ministry, he said a lot of things that were fairly conventional. But I would argue that Jesus's big contribution to humanity was his vision that we are commanded by God to love each other. Well, even that is conventional if you understand it to mean love the people who are basically just like you. The radical part was Jesus's call for us to love everyone - including our enemies. That was truly radical. That still is truly radical today.

I suspect that the disciples didn't get that particular point. Because Jewish expectation 2000 years ago was that the messiah would come with military force and defeat the Roman empire. 2000 years ago, for Jewish people, salvation meant salvation of the Jewish people as a group. Salvation was understood to be a corporate thing. Given the strong feelings of Jewish exceptionalism 2000 years ago, it's hard to believe that the disciples could possibly have understood such radical love. But in Christianity, salvation became a personal thing. Loving your enemy not only brought freedom and new life to your enemy, it also brought freedom and new life to you. Now that's radical! And I think I can see how the disciples missed that, because people today continue to miss that point. Too many people today still believe that salvation is achieved through military and other aggressive means - even people who claim to be Christian - like Donald Trump. But he has completely missed the fundamental message of Christianity which is about radical love.

So on balance, I'm glad that Jesus did not leave us the church intact, because then it would have been stuck in the cultural context of 2000 years ago. DIY sounds like a drag, but at least we get to create the church that makes sense today, in our own cultural context.

Joan and I got a taste of that last weekend. We both participated in the 3 day Annual General Meeting of the Shining Waters Regional Council in scenic Barrie. It was the first AGM for the Region, since the Region only came into being on Jan 1 of this year. I won't speak for Joan here, and she worked hard enough last weekend that I didn't want to task her with speaking today but I'm sure she will agree that the AGM was focused on how to "be church" in 2019 and beyond. The theme of the AGM was "Creating Connections" which actually described the entire weekend very well.

A fair bit of time was given over to helping people understand and perhaps even create new Networks and Clusters. Networks and Clusters are simply mechanisms for people from different congregations to work together on projects. It's not a new idea, but it's a powerful one. If you have a passion for something but don't have enough energy to make it happen, partner with other people who share your passion and then make it happen. Some of our time was spent in table discussion, and we were placed at tables based either on our geographic location or our passion. There were some fantastic passion-based tables. I missed them, however, because I hosted my own table to discuss "Compassionate Living through veganism" where I enjoyed some lively conversation around what compassionate living might look like, and how we might support each other in pursuing it.

One point of new connection for some was that we had a number of representatives from local indigenous communities present, including an indigenous person who is also an ordained minister that I shared classes with at Emmanuel College. And I have to say that I was really impressed with the indigenous engagement this year. Sometimes, the local indigenous people struggle to be involved at the AGM. Sometimes they setup a very meaningful ceremony in an out of the way place which limits participating by others. But this year they hosted a "Sacred Fire" right at Georgian College, where the AGM was held. In fact, we choose Georgian College as a venue in

part because they had assured us that having a Sacred Fire there was possible.

But 2 days before the AGM, we were informed that actually, no, there could not be a Sacred Fire on site, and also that they could not arrange a fire permit in time. Georgian College did have a prepared site for a flame, but it turned out to be a gas burner. Even worse, there were strict instructions that nothing could be burned in the flame, not even sage grass or tobacco, which are pretty much essential requirements at a Sacred Fire. Moreover, the image that most of us have of a Sacred Fire is in some secluded spot in the middle of a forest, or perhaps on the shore of a lake. But this gas burner was located right off the 400. Instead of hearing the crackle of the flames, and the sounds of wildlife all around us, we were treated to the sounds of the freeway. I pointed out to my friend that the freeway is like a river since highways today are transportation routes, like rivers used to be. She had the good grace to laugh.

But in spite of all the problems, the indigenous community persevered and did their best to present their teachings in spite of the very inappropriate site and location. Being on the Regional Executive I heard all about the problems and solutions, but when it came to sharing their teachings they did a good job of making the best of it. Their leader only slipped once, referring to the gas burner as a “Sacred Appliance” instead of a “Sacred Fire”, but she was pretty sleep-deprived at that point. And the tobacco that was prayed over at the labyrinth and at other locations over the weekend was boxed up, to be taken to the next “real” Sacred Fire in the Region. When the time came to extinguish the flames, a person knelt down and shut off the gas valve. It did not look very authentic. But it felt very authentic because of the gracious way that the teachings had been handled. As I said, overall I was very impressed.

The example from the indigenous community is in fact our own story too. As the church evolves we are changing the way that we look too. The AGM had much better mixing of ages and ethnicities and mother tongues than I had seen at previous Conference AGMs. The music was a bit more upbeat. And for the first time in church history - UCC church history that is - scheduled meeting times included time to gather in a bar. Faithful UCC people came together and were allowed to drink alcohol while we shared our stories. And the sky did not fall on our heads! We were also together to watch the

Toronto Raptors make it through to the finals, but that's another story.

But even as the church starts to look different, it is not at the cost of our mission. Our form might change, but our function does not. If the indigenous community can still share their teachings around a "Sacred Appliance", it gives me hope that our message - both for the UCC and for MGUC - can continue to be shared even if we start to look a bit different on the outside. Our form might change, but our function does not. We still share the message of radical love with our community.

Another part of the meeting was actually a discussion about how to share that message in a way that is respectful for all. We had a proposal to create a Social Justice Commission which would allow social justice issues to percolate up from the grassroots and find a home within the commission to enable making public statements on behalf of the Region concerning specific social justice issues. You might think that such a proposal would be a slam-dunk in the UCC - but I've been around long enough to know it would generate a lot of heat. The heat came from the concern that some of the members could "go rogue" and make social justice statements that represented the Region but were not endorsed by everyone. And the primary fuel source for the heat was how the UCC understands social justice in Palestine-Israel - which was not even mentioned on the floor. But people - including me - argued if the Region is not allowed to make any statements about social justice, then we are not really a church at all. And the motion passed.

And so the church continues to be built. Every day the church continues to evolve. If you know church history you know that sometimes the church makes decisions that turn out to be disasters - like initiating the Crusades to slaughter Muslims - but overall, we do find ways to move forward. That happens in the wider church. And that happens right here at MGUC too.

The church is still the ultimate DIY project. What shall we build here in Rexdale? What's your passion for the church right here? Right now? We are the church here and now. Some assembly required.

Amen.