

May 3, 2020
Christ the Servant, Reston
Easter 4
Acts 2:42-47

I had a bishop once who had a stock question for pastors who would come to him with strong opinions about ecclesiology. Ecclesiology is a fancy word for “what the church should look like.” He would say to them, “Well, which century are you trying to repristinate?” That was the first time I ever heard the word *repristinate* and I was fascinated by it. It means, “to make pristine again.” Or pure again. Like is was once.

Some pastors wanted to repristinate the 20th Century American church – specifically the 1950’s – when happy families attended worship in groves, attendance was triple what it is now, new church building were being built, new missions started, and Sunday School wings were springing up all over the place. Other pastors wanted to repristinate the 12th century European church when large gothic cathedrals were built, Gregorian chants wafted from cloisters, and the liturgy was rich with ritual and ceremony.

Still others wanted to repristinate that era in ecclesiology we heard about in our first lesson from Acts – the first century church. Jesus had just left the scene. The Holy Spirit had burst, like a fire bomb, and people like Peter were suddenly inspired to speak the Word powerfully. Acts tells us how, when the Word was heard, 3,000 were baptized in one day – people whose lives were changed forever. People who now devoted themselves to study, fellowship, communion, and prayer. It was a time of wonder and amazement for those first Christians because of all the things that were unfolding. These founding fathers and mothers of our faith sold all their possessions – houses, cattle, clothing, jewelry – and took care of those among

them who had needs. And, day by day, Acts tells us, the Lord added to their numbers.

When the bishop asked, “Which century are you trying to repristinate?” the point he was making was that *it can’t be done.*” First of all, you can’t go backward. You always have to go forward. Second, the time period you pine for so much wasn’t all that pure to begin with. Churches in 1950’s America were tremendously segregated places. I still have some of my Sunday School take-homes from that era which show Dick and Jane-like figures walking hand in hand with their parents down a dirt lane toward a country church behind a picket fence. The illustrations were never of the urban poor of a different color.

The medieval church was full of corruption where you could, if you had enough money, have your sins forgiven or even become a bishop ... a time when the average church-goer sat blindly behind a rood screen in the large cathedrals like Westminster Abbey while the holy people celebrated the mass up around the high altar – which you couldn’t see. And you only have to read St. Paul to know that this idyllic first century church – the one which practiced “from each according to his ability and to each according to his need” – this contented commune(ity) soon devolved into factionalism and some of the petty bickering we often find in churches today.

Oh, I understand the yearning to return to a church of yesteryear. Today’s church doesn’t look very good, does it? A majority of Americans claim to believe in God, but only a fraction of these Americans belong to a church. And, of those who claim to belong to a church, only a fraction actually attend. AND ... of those who *do* attend many are CEO’s (Christmas, Easter, Only’s). So, when we look at the sad state of affairs in churchdom today we are tempted to sing that gospel hymn, “Give me that ole time religion” -- from *whatever* century!

And that is tempting for *me* to do. I have my favorite century, too. I'm particularly attracted to the first one. I like to hear about the time when everybody shared everything and the bread and wine were shared in the context of an Agape-like feast. But then, I relish my 21st century worship, too, and I relish the richness of our liturgy which incorporates the best parts from many ages. And, truth be told, I long for church like we had it when I was growing up in the 1950's when it was just *expected* that everyone in town would be at a place of worship on Sunday morning. It is what you *did*!

Congregations, too, have a time they pine for, maybe when a favorite pastor was in place. But *we can't go back*. We can't live in another time. On Pentecost Sunday we can liturgically re-enact that time when the Holy Spirit came to the first Christians, but does that really have anything to do with the Holy Spirit coming to us now? Instead of asking, "What moved another community in another time and another place?" we should ask, "What is it that moves us now in this community?" How does the Spirit call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify us here?

This is a question we should be continually asking ourselves. How is the Spirit calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying us here. Now. What are we being called to do and be. Would Christ the Servant like to repristinate that era in its history when it had a much larger Sunday attendance – enough for two services? Wouldn't that be nice? But some of you tell me how you felt like two churches back then and the sense of community was broken.

Congregations can't go back. Where are we going? We have always prided ourselves on the word "Servant" in Christ the Servant. Much of that has been food service. Feeding Fellowship House. Feeding the homeless at our Tuesday lunches. Feeding the Homeless Women's Shelter at N Street Village. But life after Coronavirus will not be the same. How many

organizations now will be anxious for outside groups to come in to handle cups and plates and silverware and food that will be touched by their residents?

We may be asked, going forward, to re-define “service” here. How will the Holy Spirit call us to “serve” after the time of Coronavirus. It seems to me that we have a head start on that. Lately, we have not only reached out to the poor, the hungry, and those society has frowned upon, but we have begun to ask the “why” question. Why is their hunger? Why is their poverty? Why is their economic inequality? Why do our LGBTQ+ community feel a cold shoulder when they walk into so many of our congregations?

Let me wind down with a parable: A man and a woman were fishing on the river bank when they saw a woman struggling in the current. They rescued her. Soon, they saw a man struggling. They rescued him, too. This continued all afternoon. Finally, the exhausted pair decided to go upstream to find out where and why so many people were falling in. They discovered a beautiful overlook along the river’s edge without any warning signs or protective barriers. The couple went to community leaders to report the number of victims they had rescued and explain the connection to the unprotected overlook. Community leaders agreed to install a protective guard and post warning signs. Soon, the people downstream stopped seeing people float by.

The church – our church – has done a good job of rescuing people downstream. Maybe our calling going forward will be to serve by addressing the upstream issues. We may be able to serve the outcast once again. But just maybe our larger calling will be to stop people from being cast out in the first place.