

John 1.29-42

“Three Invitations”

This past weekend the board of St. Paul’s United Church gathered together to wonder about the future of our community of faith. We used as our guide a book written by John Pentland called; Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith. **(change slide)** I want to thank the members of our board for taking the time to dream about our church and how we can make the journey from a good church to a great church. **(change slide)**

Pentland’s book describes how Hillhurst United Church in Calgary, Alberta found new life. Their journey of renewal is an impressive one. They went from a Sunday morning worship attendance of 85 of mostly elderly people to over 350 with a healthy cross section of ages. They went from a budget of \$120,000 in 2004 to over \$800,000 in 2015. They currently have over 29 paid staff. What I like about Pentland’s book is that he does not suggest that we just follow his simple steps and “viola”

our church will grow just as his did. He would be the first to recognize that Calgary prior to the fall of oil prices was a place of unprecedented growth in this country.

Instead of a blueprint for success, Pentland offers a simple suggestion and that is to learn to be curious and learn how to ask questions. Don't worry about giving people the right answers, just keep asking questions and listen. "I wonder what we could do differently that might attract new people? I wonder what our neighbours think of us and what might they need from us that we could provide?"

This might seem rather simplistic, but it is quite a revolutionary concept for the church. We, the church, have often felt like we have the answers and we would be happy to share them with you if you would just join us on Sunday mornings for worship. Our lack of curiosity keeps us doing the same things over and over again and wondering why we get the same results; decline. Some would say that is a definition of insanity.

Pentland is on to something here. Curiosity is a powerful tool for renewal. Curiosity will change us; “I wonder if I tried to do this differently what might happen?” Curiosity will change our church; “I wonder if we tried doing this differently, what might happen? It could even change our world; “Is there a different way to solve our differences than by violence?”

Several years ago, I took a course on conflict management. One of the tools we were taught was the importance of remaining curious in conflict situations. To ask questions like; “I wonder why I am reacting this way? I wonder what I have said that has triggered this response.” It is a very good theory, but sometime difficult to remember in the heat of the moment.

Pentland suggests that Jesus modeled for us this open curiosity. Part of what made Jesus attractive was that Jesus asked people questions that engaged them and drew them in. Pentland says that in the four gospels Jesus asks a total of 135 different questions. Jesus also

rarely answered a question directly. He often responded to a question with a question which can be irritating at times.

Somewhere along the line we the church missed this about Jesus and we became more interested in telling people what we thought was truth and less interested in asking questions. Unfortunately, people have just drifted away from the church because the answers we have provided have not matched the questions they were asking.

Because I have been reading Pentland's book this week about curiosity and the importance of questions I was intrigued by the questions that I found in our passage, today from the gospel of John. John appears to be a good church person. He seems to have all the answers. He tells all who will listen that this Jesus is the lamb of God. He is the one that I told you about. Jesus is the son of God. **(Change Slide)**

Jesus however does not make any such pronouncements. When Jesus discovers that two of John's disciples are following him, he turns

around and asks them; “What are you looking for?” On one level that is a very simple question much like a clerk asking a customer who has just arrived in the store; “Is there anything I can help you with today?”

On another level, it can also be a very deep question. What are you looking for can also be an invitation to explore what is missing in your life? What are the questions that keep you up at night? What do you need to find your way forward on the journey of your life? What are you hungry for? What is your deepest thirst? What do you need to find meaning in your life? I wonder how different our lives could be if we heard God, the Divine Mystery, asking us those kinds of questions. What do you need today that we help you live your life more fully?

I wonder how different our church might be if we began to ask our each other gathered here and our neighbours just outside our doors; what are they looking for? What do they need today that can help them live their lives more fully?

The disciples respond to Jesus' question; "What are you looking for," with a question of their own; "Where are you staying?" Again, this could be a simple question. They are tired and they need a place to stay. It can also be a deeper question. "Okay, John has told us that you are the lamb of God, the son of God, the Messiah, so show us how you live?"

I think that is an important question. Where we live often tells us a lot about how we live? I also believe that people are more interested in how we live out our lives of faith than what we say we believe as people of faith. It is one thing to say we do not believe in pipelines and that the tar sands are bad, but it is something more powerful if that belief results in driving less, in finding ways to decrease our carbon footprint and in seeking ways to help provide solutions to what to do with all those folks who are dependent on oil for their livelihood.

Jesus responds to the question; "where do you live," by saying; "Come and see." Technically, that is not a question, but it is an

invitation to curiosity. Jesus does not give them any answer he just invites them to be open and see where this will all lead. Jesus did not have a permanent home. Instead, he invites them into a relationship and on a journey. A journey that will change them and will ultimately change the world.

Several years ago, there was a video series called; “living the questions.” It was a variety of video clips of some of the more progressive theologians of that time exploring some of the tenets of our Christian faith; who is God, who is Jesus, what are we about as the church. I found it to be a very helpful tool and I have used it in every church I have served. I found it helpful because it reminds us that we do not have the answers. Faith is less about certainty and more about trusting in a Divine Mystery that walks with us as we journey through the forest of our questions.

I invite us today to nurture the spiritual discipline of curiosity. Leaning to be curious will change us and it will transform this

community of faith. I invite us to learn to ask good, tough and deep questions of our lives, of our faith and of each other. I invite us to “come and see” what is out there and what adventure the Divine Mystery might have in store for us just outside our comfort zone.

Amen.