

## Sermon Archive 327

Sunday 10 January, 2021

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Acts 19: 1-7

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I think I want to paint a wee picture of the mystery of God emerging, in just a small way, from the fractious dysfunction of an early Christian movement. There are three big dysfunction building blocks to this sermon, then a putting-together of them for our times.

Here we go.

-ooOoo-

I note, in the reading from Acts, that the conversation between Paul and people of Ephesus is described as happening while Apollos is away from Ephesus, visiting another city.

In the dim, distant days of my slowly dissipating naiveté, while still a house-master in a boarding school in Dunedin, I attended staff meetings each week. The staffing structure of the boarding house worked out that each staff member was allocated one day a week to manage the boys in the house. I did Tuesdays, and every fifth weekend. Other people preceded my reign of terror by doing their Mondays, and succeeded my mess on Wednesdays. The idea of the weekly staff meeting was to share information about how each of the boys was, and to clarify our management processes, so that the kids would receive consistent policy and treatment day by day.

For the sake of helping the boys know where they stood, what was required, and how we were there for them if they needed us (of course they needed us - they were boys dislocated from their homes) we wanted to make sure that our policy was clear, our approach was consistent, our responses to matters that arose were not confusing. The staff meetings operated on the basis of bringing clarity and consistency to the community - in which we hoped these wee boys would grow and mature, even flourish.

The meetings were often frustrating. Some of the people on staff were much more hardline than I was. They seemed to think that boys could be expected to stand in straight lines, and that girls should never be allowed to visit. At one of our staff

meetings, we affirmed the practice of house masters, before every breakfast, checking the cleanliness of each boy's fingernails. Privately, while I wondered whether checking their capacity to think critically mightn't have been more important, I knew that I couldn't express that to the staff meeting, nor could I begin to describe the spiritual landscape upon which such a wondering might have been born. So, in keeping with the spirit of the staff meeting, where we decided what we would do, and how we would apply it to living, breathing, growing, evolving human beings in our care, I adopted the practice of checking the finger nails.

Because *I* was willing (sometimes reluctantly on matters not of huge principle) to tuck away my own thoughts, feelings and opinions, for the sake of consistency, one thing that really upset me, was when others at the staff meeting, ignored our decisions, and did their own thing anyway. If, on a Tuesday, I was trying to be consistent with the agreed position (that consistency giving clarity to the people in our care), then on Wednesday lackadaisical Joe housemaster let everything go, I felt great resentment.

This kind of experience sits in the back of my experience, and it makes me alert to little things I read.

I read that it was when Apollos, who had taught the people of Ephesus, was away from the boarding house, visiting Corinth, that Paul dropped by with some authority and critical questioning. Theoretically on the same team, for the good of the people whom God loves, Paul asks some questions that seem to sow division.

Just a pause in this line of thought. My thought on this has kind of been affected by a writing of the Paul in question. In his first letter to the people in Corinth, Paul notes that in that city, factions have formed between those who were taught by Paul himself, and those who were taught by Apollos [1 Corinthians 3:6]. Paul finds himself saying that some in the city say they belong to Paul, while others say they belong to Apollos. In his letter, Paul seeks to make the point that one may plant, and another may water, but God does the growing. Affiliation to one faction or another isn't helpful. That's what Paul says in his letter to the people in the city where we now hear Apollos is visiting. And while Paul is visiting the city in which Apollos has been teaching, we hear he's asking questions which suggest Apollos has failed to make an important point.

Paul asks "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit". Then he said

"Into what then were you baptized?"

These are questions critical against the person who has been teaching them. The questions suggest that their teacher is wrong - or at least has only perceived part of the picture. The questions focus in on gaps . . .

In the development of the early Christian community, even though the prevailing, now most recognizable voice is only asking questions, his questions reveal passive-aggressive tensions in the faith.

Let's put that to one side - for the moment. Here's the second big part.

-ooOoo-

Let's look at what the Christian faith is looking like in the tiny group of believers in Ephesus. They're people who have heard from Apollos, about a new faith framed by John the Baptist, who baptized people in a baptism of repentance. Repentance isn't a bad start, is it? People who've been troubled by conscience. People who, maybe, have some recollection of ten old commandments that tug at their sense of ethics. People who want to do better.

That's what they've heard about, from John the Baptist, via Apollos, and that's what's lodged in their spirit. So this is a community stricken by what's gone wrong, by what's not been achieved, by what looms large in condemning them - baptized into awareness of sin and failure.

At one level, this is better than a community of psychopaths or narcissists - who aren't even yet aware of what is wrong - or are indifferent to it. I don't know where you start in narcissistic communities - maybe by crucifying someone in their midst to draw attention and create some arresting horror. Not sure.) Whatever; the community focused on regret and repentance, and sorrow for sins, is at least better than that. But you sure don't want to live in a world where perpetual sorrow for sin is the final word. Constant admission of failure; perpetual miring in the failure; no entering into the world of failure of that figure sketched by John of the One who is to come, who comes with something else, more like something in the shape of hope and liberation!

In Ephesus, if the brand new Christian religion is only about what we want to repent, with no answer to that, with no next step away from that, with release from that, well . . .

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The third thing. This group in Ephesus numbers twelve. The same author who reports the saving of 3000 people on the Day of Pentecost, and the conversion of all men and women at the preaching of Philip, and the many who converted after Peter's preaching in Caesarea, here reports an event going on for a people numbering twelve. In a city of 250,000 (that tally making it, in that time, the second largest city in the world), what are 12 people? This is not a numerically significant gathering of ill-taught people.

That's the end of the third building block of this sermon.

-ooOoo-

The end of the narrative of Acts 19 has someone laying hands on the wee group of people, whom we are told receive the Holy Spirit, and begin a new life. That's not a bad development for the church community we've heard so miserably described.

There are factions, and people putting others right behind the backs of those who're not in the room. There are perhaps petty jealousies within the leadership. There are communities focused on only what is wrong, with no sense of openness to grace or progress. There are tiny numbers - numbers so much as to make the whole thing seem irrelevant in the unfolding of history or the story of the world.

And in the middle of it, people receive the gift of the Holy Spirit - the One who lives and gives life to others.

I wonder if there is this sense, sometimes, in parts of the church, that the church needs to be perfect before life may come forth from it - or from its engagement with the holy. Clean your act up, church! Earn the attention, or action of God, church!

But here, in Acts, we find a picture of a real pig's ear of a church, which doesn't really know its bottom from its elbow, led by fractious and personally insecure individuals, finding life in God anyway. Is God happy to visit the fatally flawed? Is God willing to work with a community that's got a long, long way to go?

If so, well, that's one for the books! Although it was only for twelve, so it probably doesn't matter.

Let's keep a moment of quiet.

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