

Faraway Familiar City Scenes: Touring the Early Church in 7 Cities Message 1 – JERUSALEM

JERUSALEM: THE CHURCH THAT BECAME A COMMUNITY

Many of our world cities are unique landmarks in the minds of people – just mention names such as London, Paris, Rome, Mexico City, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Beijing, Toronto, Vancouver – and those names of cities will instantly evoke images and memories in the minds of people. More and more - We are becoming a world of large city-centers. In our world – 50% of people live in these large city-centers.

God has a purpose in history – it is more than simply to save individuals – his purpose is to create a new humanity – a new community – a new people who share the same beliefs in a common Lord – this new community has a name – it is called The Church – and in every city where it exists – it is to be unlike anything that the city has ever known or seen before.

This idea of being **the city** is crucial – think with me for a few moments. Cities are more than just collections of buildings – cities are dynamic environments of social energy – financial centers – political power – if you live and work in the city – that may define your entire life – the worldviews that we are familiar with today – traditional – modern – post-modern- are all reflected in the city – different sexual orientations are accepted by the idea of being in a city – you can do in the city what you would not openly do in a rural community which are usually more conservative - the arts and culture are centered in cities – cities often have universities – you may well be more lonely in a city in a large apartment building than in a small country town where everyone knows their neighbors.

So a city is more than buildings – “City” is more than a place – it is a mindset – it describes and means a way of living which is vastly different from living in the country.

What we seldom think about is - The life and ministry of the early Christians was amazingly city-centred. Paul’s missionary journeys in Acts essentially ignored the countryside – his work was not in the rural areas – when he entered a new region – he usually found the largest city there – preached and established a church.

Starting this morning and for the next 6 Sundays – I would like to take you on a whirlwind road trip to seven key cities in the Book of Acts – cities like Athens, Rome, Corinth -- each city will teach us something about what the church must be in the city where it is. They will speak to us here at First Baptist Church in our city of Vancouver.

There is a question that hardly ever leaves my mind – it haunts me every day and sometimes during the night - it is this – what kind of church will impact this city of Vancouver?

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I think about First Baptist Church in our city at three levels.

1 – we are a city church – we are a church in a large bustling city – a metropolis of energy – incredible beauty - huge social diversity – enormous social needs and challenges.

2 – we are an international church – people here from many countries reflecting the ethnic diversity of the city in the church – that’s the way the church should be.

3 – seeking to be a neighborhood church – two levels –

1 - You are a neighbor to people where you live and work – 2 - and we are also a church in our neighborhood – needing to understand and meet the many challenges of our neighborhood. This dual role is not always an easy dance.

We start our ministry road trip today in the city of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is a crucial city in the Bible – if you have ever been in Jerusalem – you can never forget what it looks like – what it is to walk its crowded streets – see the golden Dome of the Rock in the morning dawn from the top of the Mount of Olives – or watch Jewish men and women pray at the Wailing Wall or see soldiers with Uzis walking down the street.

Jerusalem has always been a strategic city for the Jewish people – The Temple Solomon built was situated there –then in 586 BC – the city fell to King Nebuchadnezzar and was destroyed. Its walls and towers and the Temple were rebuilt by Ezra and Nehemiah. Unlike any other city - Jerusalem was a city with the symbols of God at its centre.

Jesus knew Jerusalem well – he visited there several times in his life – he prayed over it - "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (Luke 13)

Jesus was crucified by the political powers of Jerusalem.

What image of heaven is John given as he looks towards eternity – it is of a holy city – it is a new Jerusalem – coming down out of heaven from God.

Just before the cross – Jesus says to his followers –

"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.

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8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Just before we unpack that and what it means for us today – pause with me to see this.

Let me take you back to 586 BC – Jerusalem falls – the people are taken into exile to Babylon – this is the time of the prophet Jeremiah – Hear what he says – Jeremiah 29 -

1 This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

4 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."

Notice the thought – **seek the peace and the prosperity of the city...**

The task of the church is to bless its city – to be a great church so that we can nurture a great city – what God has given us is to be disseminated through us into the life of the city – what the spirit does in the church is to be a model for the city – The church is a community of the Spirit within its city – so that the evidence of the Spirit will be released into the city. We will continue to unpack this in the weeks ahead.

Keep that idea running in the background of your mind as we continue.

Lets go to Jerusalem and join this early church -- So a group of men and women wait in Jerusalem as Jesus instructed them to do – the Holy Spirit settles upon them in a way that lies beyond their imagination – the verbal disunity and the racial chaos of the tower of Babel is reversed as each hears in their own language – we are given a powerful picture of community life.

Acts 4:31-35.

31 After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

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32. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

34 There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales

35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

So we ask ourselves – what does it take to reproduce that kind of community today in our city – where Christians open their lives to one another – I have a sense that many of us yearn for church to mean more than a place to go – we want it to mean a people we belong to – people with whom we will laugh and cry and share our lives.

I am well aware – there are thousands of sermons on this section. So we may ask – where do we start?

Our starting place must be to accept that this reality has already been created for us. The unity of the church is the work – the creation and the gift of the Spirit to us. You are my brother/sister on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done for both of us – and we are in community because of the gift of the Spirit to us. There is nothing for us to do. Just as we kneel at the Cross with empty hands to receive grace – so we come to the Spirit with empty hands to receive the gift of community. We are here together only because of what Jesus Christ has done for both of us.

Then why does this unity of the Spirit and the experience of community seem so easily to slip through our fingers? Why at times can we feel so apart when the Spirit has already made us one?

Let me suggest this – the barriers and blockages to the Spirit bringing the gift of community are not in structures or in organization – the barriers/blockages are internal – they lie within each of us – and one way of seeing them is that these blockages lie in the spirit of the “city” which is embedded in our thinking. We are city people – and this means more than the fact that we live in the city – it means that in more ways than we are aware – the spirit of the city – the mindset of the city - lives in us. The spirit of the city is by its nature -- antagonistic and in conflict to the Spirit who brings community.

Here are 4 examples of that clash between the city and the Spirit – the result is – they work to prevent us from becoming the community of Christ that the Spirit calls us to be.

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THE SPIRIT OF THE CITY ENCOURAGES CONSUMERISM.

This simply means such things as – we see what we want and we buy it - – we want our needs met – we put ourselves first. That is why there is so much advertising everywhere we go in a city. There is no community in consumerism – it is city mindset – find what you want - and buy it. Consumerism negates community. In contrast –

GOD'S SPIRIT CALLS US TO BE A COMMUNITY OF GENEROSITY.

Acts 4:32. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

The gift of community that came from the Spirit of God moved them to release whatever they had. People who had much brought much – people who had little brought little – community is not about equal giving but equal sacrifice. They saw the generosity of the Spirit flow into their lives so that they were generous in response. One of the ways in which we should be able to measure the presence and power of the Spirit among us is by the spirit of generosity. Community grows in the soil of generosity and that flows from the heart of God. Our two recent Christmas offerings to work in Africa shows this – Gordon King talked about that last Sunday.

1st John 3

17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?

18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

We almost automatically think of money and possessions – we also need to think of things like time – one of our most valuable commodities today. That's why it is often easier to find volunteers in a rural setting than in the city. It is often an issue of time. City people are busy with their own lives.

We ask the Spirit of God to come and settle upon us – remove the consumerism of the city – that deadly toxic air we breath – and invite us to breath the fresh air of community.

THE SPIRIT OF THE CITY BREEDS SUPERFICIALITY.

What I mean by this is – that as long as things look good on the outside – we will be happy – what is external and often shallow will be enough. It is window-dressing.

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In contrast – GOD’S SPIRIT CALLS US TO BE A COMMUNITY OF HONESTY.

We see this in a powerful incident in Acts 5 – story of Ananias and Sapphira –

1. Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property.

2 With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

3 Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?

4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God."

5 When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened.

6 Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

7 About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.

8 Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?" "Yes," she said, "that is the price."

9 Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

10 At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

11 Great fear seized the whole church

No wonder - what a great time to take the offering! Note the reason for this event – note what the essential sin was – it was not the fact that they gave less than the land sold for – that was their right – it was the fact that they lied to the Holy Spirit – they pretended they had given the whole amount – it was window-dressing. It lacked basic honesty.

Story about Jim – asked to pray at communion – refused because he had had an argument with his wife – he could have faked it – but he did not. I have no idea what his wife said to him on the way home!!

Many of us avoid going to the honest places with people – we don't want to take the risk – we don't want the emotional effort that this will demand – sometimes we don't know how or when to express our emotional responses to people. So either we blow up – or we fake it.

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Ephesians 4:26.

In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down on your anger (same word – stronger emphasis), and do not give the devil a foothold.”

So much more could be said – we must move on --

THE SPIRIT OF THE CITY CULTIVATES LONELINESS.

I think we all know that if you want to be alone – go to the largest city you can get to – rent an apartment in the tallest building you can find. In the country – you know your neighbors – in the suburbs – you see your neighbors (when you cut the grass or at a little league game) - in the city – you may not see anybody.

GOD’S SPIRIT CALLS US TO BE A COMMUNITY OF VULNERABILITY.

Last year we experienced some difficult times as a family –we shared those with you – some of you thanked me for being vulnerable – pastors are often not very vulnerable – sometimes congregations don’t want them to be vulnerable.

Actually – I was not being vulnerable. Let me explain two words that may seem to mean the same.

Transparency – it means disclosing ourselves in ways and at times that we choose. It is a good place to start but it is not vulnerability. When I shared with you about our family – I was being transparent – but I was still very much in control. What lies beyond transparency is **Vulnerability**– it means that we give others the right to know our pain – our weaknesses – and we invite them to have access into our life – to speak in to it and to care for us. Vulnerability lies beyond transparency and it is harder.

In marriage –we call this nakedness – Genesis 2 – naked and not ashamed – I have sense that while marriages have physical nakedness – but not all experience this much deeper nakedness of the soul.

Vulnerability in relationships means things like trust, openness – risk- being defenseless. No wonder most of us skip our way around it.

Bonhoeffer says to us – We speak to one another on the basis of the help we both need – we admonish one another to go the way Christ bids us to go – we are both gentle and severe with one another -- why should we be afraid of one another since both of us only have God to fear.

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The circles for vulnerability have to be chosen carefully – perhaps several men meet together to pray and share – one day one says to the other – I have trouble with pornography on the internet – can you help me?

The next time they met and one asks – how are you doing – they know exactly what they are talking about. Two women meet to share issues of the heart between women.

When we do this – we are dis-assembling – we are dis-mantling what the city has built in us – the mask of pretence and self-protection-- The Spirit is removing the old patterns of loneliness – and instead is calling us to risk community.

Related to that --

THE SPIRIT OF THE CITY PROMOTES ANONYMITY.

What I mean is – we live in our own world – our own ethics – we do not see ourselves as accountable to anyone else. We do our own thing – for many young adults in the city – this will include their sexual lives and relationships. Anonymity comes from a spirit of independence and privacy which negates the birthing and growth of community.

GOD’S SPIRIT CALLS US TO BE A COMMUNITY OF ACCOUNTABILITY.

In the community of the Spirit – we are called brothers and sisters together -- - we are called to bear one another’s burdens. We are called to walk together –

1 Thess 5:14.

14 And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

Life in the city says – how I live my life is none of your business – get out of my face - life in the spirit says – I care about you enough that I will speak into your life.

Is there someone to whom you can trust your life – who can see the blind spots and who can protect you when you are weak and vulnerable? This is the agony and the ecstasy of community.

So here are 4 things – generosity – honesty – vulnerability – accountability. They come from the experience of community as the Spirit is at work in us. They are to create a community in a city that is remarkably unlike anything that the city has ever seen.

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This kind of people – living like that – will as Jeremiah says – bless the city in which they live – as Acts says – they enjoy the favor of all the people (the residents of the city).

Where do we start? What do we do to get that kind of community in the church to bless the city?

Well – in one sense – there is nothing to do – the work is already done – the work of unity is found in a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. We are already brothers and sisters like this because of the cross. If there are barriers – and we do not experience that unity – that joy of community – that excitement of being together -- perhaps it is because the spirit of the city still has a residue in us.

It may well be harder to be a spiritual community in the city than in a rural setting – There is the challenge of high mobility – community becomes harder when you increase density – community is more easily understood and practiced in rural areas – then there are the distances that people travel to be together for a short while and then we drive home – the anonymity that the city allows – we may have to work harder to overcome these things – but our starting place has been created for us – it is this table – the Spirit has implanted in the DNA of the church this need – this drive – this incentive – this yearning to be the people of God in our city.

Just as they waited in Jerusalem for the Spirit to come – we come to the Table and we acknowledge that the Spirit has come – he has come to empower the church – and he has come to blend us into community.

When we take this bread and wine – we commit ourselves afresh to Christ – and to each other – we confess that we love Christ and one another – we have fellowship with God – and with one another

We declare at this table that we are a community devoted to the apostles teaching – devoted to fellowship – devoted to the breaking of bread and devoted to prayer.

May we not be anything less than the community that the Spirit has created and calls us to be.