

More than Chaps and Pews: Something Greater Than the Temple is Here

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It is quite a thing to talk about the word of God on this joyful, ground breaking Sabbath celebration in this, one of the oldest, most revered churches in Nova Scotia. This is a temple of historical significance and demarcation. These bricks seep tradition and institution. Your neighbour is the Lieutenant Governor for heaven's sake.

Tradition, institution and celebration. Two years ago I was at a community celebration on a very hot day. I had gathered with friends to mark the occasion with a cold drink. Shortly after we got there, they needed to leave so I said, "Go ahead, I'm okay finishing my drink by myself." So, I did what I always do when I am by myself in a large gathering – watch people. My need to watch people almost borders on voyeurism, or at least rudeness. I was eavesdropping, I mean, listening to my neighbours respectfully on that hot day, and I heard two older gentlemen having a very familiar discussion. One of the men, gruff voiced, well he was very disappointed with the turn out these days. Oh, it wasn't the number of people who were turning out he said, it was that they were all older. Yes, said the other one, young people don't come any more. They have no idea how hard it is to make this institution work. They like to stand on the sidelines and cheer everyone on but they don't see the importance of the work. They both sighed. The second man offered wistfully that if they only knew what they sacrificed in order to get to this state, they would not take everything for granted. Well, Gruff answered, not only that, but have seen what they wear when they do come? No one understands the importance of tradition these days. No one dresses up any more.

I could stand it no more. I got up, introduced myself and asked them what church they were talking about. There was this horrible moment of confused silence. They were not talking about church, they said. They were talking about the Gay Pride Parade which made perfect sense seeing as we were sitting together in the post parade beer tent. But, but, I stammered, you were talking about people not dressing properly.... Yes, Gruff said, no one wears chaps any more. It is very important to wear chaps and no one wants to see us old fellers in them. Someone should be wearing the chaps. The chaps are tradition. I considered this for a moment. There is always a narrative of struggle in the establishment of tradition and symbol. Something greater than the tradition itself had given birth to it, that is, it obviously was more than seeing cute buff guys wearing chaps. What is the real story? I asked them.

Then they told me about the Stonewall riots. I am ashamed to say, I knew nothing about the Stonewall riots up to that point. Stonewall was a first final stand for Gay Rights in New York. It was the first time that Gay Rights groups fought back against government/state sponsored and sanctioned persecution of homosexuals. The criminalization of homosexuality meant that the only places gay people could meet, fall in love, have sex or both was in bars, parks and other easier to hide in places. In 1969 New York decided to crack down on sexual "deviants" as gay people were called. Raids

on bars were becoming increasingly repressive and violent. Finally, at the Stonewall Inn, Gays fought back. The Stonewall Inn was owned by the Mafia at the time. However, something greater than the Mafia, something greater than the Stonewall Inn, something greater than that small group of queer men and dykes who had finally had enough was there. Police quickly lost control of the situation and had to retreat. There were more skirmishes with Dykes and Gay men fighting in ordinary clothes, in drag and yes, some were in chaps. Thus a symbol and a tradition were born. After the Stonewall riots two significant Gay Rights organizations were formed and in 1970 the first Gay Pride Parade was held in New York. Men in Chaps figured largely.

Like all institutions and movements, the Gay Pride Parade has morphed, changed and transformed the very society that it had the cheekiness to parade through. It has become greater than itself, greater than the tradition. By being visible, audacious and demanding equal rights it has moved society in such a way that young queers do not feel a pressing need to uphold the institution, to agitate and to parade. They are out and they have enough places to feel safe in metropolitan areas that the struggle seems mostly won. They meet each other at work, openly at bars and online. To be sure, the younger generation acknowledges that there is still much work to do in changing prejudice. However there is some intergenerational conflict. Younger gay men sometimes do not understand the need for older men to meet at parks or why older homosexuals find it difficult to be out. Many young people have not experienced the worst horrors of the struggle – thank God. Thus, the need for the upholding of the traditional symbols of the Gay rights movement does not have the same imperative as it does for older gays.

Traditional symbolism needs to be respected because vigilance is needed. Designated Affirming Congregations are needed. There are Pharisees advising our government these days. Gay Pride is on their target list. Opposition to human freedom in Canada is intensifying, orchestrated by the religious right. That is why what you do here today at St. Matthews is incredibly important. To become Affirming is to say to the religious Christian right, “Do not DARE say that you speak on Christianity’s behalf.” To become Affirming is to say to the religious right and to the irreligious that we are followers of Jesus, Prince of Peace, Son of Man and we believe such a one embodied Love itself – Love that celebrates diverse sexual orientation as a gift from God. Love that does to another what we want done to ourselves; love that guarantees in civil law and in practice freedom to love and freedom to marry. Love that says God desires Mercy, not sacrifice. Love that says the law of the land, our great land of Canada, is law that serves the people - all of the people, all of the time. Law serves the people. People do not serve the law.

So, Jesus encountered these Pharisees. I feel sorry for the Pharisees to be truthful. Perhaps it is because as I age and accumulate all of these years in ministry I find myself becoming more Pharisaic. It is easier that way – to refer to the law when troubled with big questions. It is so much more difficult to think about the greater things, the greater good, the big picture. It is so much more work to think about the needs of people as opposed to the needs of the rules. To think about mercy instead of letters of law. It all takes empathy and empathy is gruelling work. The Pharisees challenge the good rabbi Jesus about his disciples. Doesn’t he have any control over his guys? It has come to their attention that they were picking wheat kernels, rubbing them between their hands and eating them because they were hungry. The Sabbath laws are a good thing. Jesus is

not opposed to them. Sabbath is about making sure everyone has some down time, some rest time. Some space to contemplate God and tend to their Spirit. In all times, the economic machine of Empire would like everyone to work 24/7. The people of God recognized thousands of years ago that health requires Sabbath. Most Christian and Jewish scholars agree that picking grain on the Sabbath is not even something most people of the day regarded as a violation. These Pharisees are extremists.

Jesus reminds them of precedent from their own history books and sacred texts.

King David did it when he and his men were hungry. An incident that took place in the midst of battle when they had run out of supplies. It was okay then, it was thought, because it was part of God's greater plan, God's greater good. If David could do it, how much more can the Messiah, Son of David, his followers do it? It is permitted then to observe the rules of the Sabbath less rigorously when it is part of God's mercy. The writer of Matthew adds a second argument. In the temple the priests are allowed to work on the Sabbath because they are tending to the cultic needs of the temple, the institution. The tending of the temple which involved arranging the offerings and the various rituals of creating sacred space, all that *work*, takes precedent over those strict laws of the Sabbath. In fact, Jesus is saying, you guys work all the time on the Sabbath. That is because Temple work is greater than Sabbath laws. Now, what activity is greater than even the temple work? Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 – *"I desire mercy, not sacrifice."*

There it is. That is the shocker. In order of precedent, starting from the bottom up, God's preference for our activity and attention are 3) the law, the rules, the ordering of things 2) the care of the spiritual community or infrastructure or institutions 1) Mercy. It is mercy that trumps everything, every time. Activities that involve the meeting of human needs, like hunger, shelter, healing and love are given weight over all other requirements. How do we determine what they are? The basic rule of caring for others as you would want to be cared for is the yardstick. Well, with that statement, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice," Jesus has outed himself as a Mercy lover. This is a pivotal point in gospel of Matthew. In outing himself, he has also outed the Pharisees as unmerciful. They begin to plot to kill him.

Well, good people of St. Matthew's, I tell you something greater than your temple is here. You have chosen Mercy. Now, you will have trouble. There is a reason that the Pharisees want to kill Jesus, a good one actually. They know things will change. Choosing Mercy will transform not only the temple, but also the law. Something greater happens. A story from St. John's. When I arrived at St. John's it became apparent that they had been talking about becoming Affirming for almost twenty years. A gentleman spoke to me about it one day. He is a "rules, law and order" kind of guy. He said, he had been against Affirming and then had changed his mind. How, I asked, did that happen. He told me the story of a lesbian couple in the congregation who adopted a family of three children. These kids, he said, behaved as you would expect children to behave who had their short lives continuously disrupted. In the beginning he said, they did everything but hang off the light fixtures. However, within six months, those two women had those children turned around. He said, the obvious love and care they gave and received back made all the difference. It was then, he said, that he realized that it was love that counted, not gender. When mercy is lived out, the wise take note and let the law be adjusted

accordingly. Something greater happened at St. John's, mercy lived out, changed us because mercy trumps everything for the faithful.

Change happened. When we became Affirming at St. John's we were really surprised at who began to come. We hoped for and expected members of the Gay, Lesbian and Transgendered communities to come. They did and we are being transformed by them. More young families headed by heterosexual parents began to come. They told us they wanted their children to grow up in a church in which sexual orientation is just another aspect of human identity and celebrated. That surprised us. People of racial minorities are beginning to come. People who are differently abled are beginning to come. Something greater is happening. We are changing. I firmly believe that in making the decision to become Affirming, we were able to think outside the proverbial box of church rules and said to ourselves, "Why not worship in a Conservatory?" Why not redevelop? When you become Affirming you throw open the boundaries of many other things. This is frightening exhilarating and is at the very heart of the gospel.

This is not new for you, St. Matt's. Something greater than rules and laws has been happening here for a long time. The first time Carl and I brought a youth group from Fall River here to see a performance of Jesus Christ Superstar in the nineties, we all sat there in our pews at the end of it, stunned by the power of the gospel told in a new way. The young fella next to me leaned over and said, "Is this a real church?" What did he mean, I asked him. "Can this happen in a real church?" he asked. My reply that I was beginning to see that St. Matt's was more real a church than most. St. Matt's of the lunchtime concerts; St. Matt's of the rock nativity; St. Matt's that cast a female Tony in West Side Story. St. Matt's who had the Friday night cafes for seekers and a Sabbath morning breakfast for homeless people. You insisted that at these breakfast tables all are welcome, congregation members and the homeless. All are expected, eating bread side by side, relating, caring and living Mercy. Knowing that something greater than the bricks and mortar of temple is afoot, is not new for you. As you search back in your living memory you will recall that you opened yourselves up to receive what we knew then as Vietnamese Boat People. This was controversial in those days as churches were accused of bringing in "dependent foreigners" and sheltering potential covert communists. Welcoming is not new for you. Mercy is not new for you. Affirming is a natural step for you. You did same sex unions blessings before the law allowed civil marriages and then immediately upon legalization, you did marriages.

You have taken an important step today. You have practiced decision making from Jesus' hierarchy. In becoming Affirming you are choosing mercy, you are changing your temple and you are creating new laws and rules for yourselves. There will be trouble when you take this stand. In this post G20 age of a new criminalization of dissent, state sanctioned discrimination against difference and diversity will not be far behind. To be Affirming is to take a stand for mercy. To take a stand for mercy will bring trouble from the Pharisees.

So how do we bear it? This pivotal but fairly obscure scripture passage is immediately preceded by one of the most beloved of all. "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Besides people watching, I am also intrigued by oxen teams. I loved seeing the teams at the Fall Fairs and often spend time talking with their owners. Oxen teams will become

increasing rare partly because it takes years and years of training and practice to create a team that can pull together. First a yoke is custom made for those two oxen. Then they have to learn to understand each other as well as their trainer. They discover how to pull, push, stop and back up. In order to do this, they need to learn every nuance of one another's movements. The pay off is huge for their human owners. There is very little oxen can not pull and no terrain they can not cross in comparison to horses. As well, oxen comparatively live on less feed and can tolerate poorer quality. Indeed, oxen homesteaded North America. In this passage, Jesus is not saying that our load will be light. He promises the yoke will be light. This means two things. First, he is promising that the yoke will fit. It will not chafe. That is key for a good team and a good pull. Secondly, Jesus is telling us that the other head through that yoke is none other than his own. I kid you not. You will bear the trouble because God is with us. God is not above cracking the whip or riding on top of the load. God is yoked next to you, along side in Christ Jesus.

You have burdens. You have work. You have laws and temples and mercy to take care of. God is yoked with you. But then again, you probably knew that. That is why you became Affirming. St. Matt's, temple of God, Something greater is happening here today. There's no telling what will happen now.

Bibliography:

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