

Dear Friends

This week in Winnipeg there are seven churches and three individuals who are in court, contesting the public health orders which have placed strict limitations on the gatherings of religious groups. The argument they are making is based on our Charter Rights for freedom of religion and assembly. It will be decided as a matter of law and I can't imagine that any change in the interpretation of the public health orders will be forthcoming and I am thankful for that. To do so would be to pull on a thread that would unravel the tapestry that has been created by all the sacrifice, all the sorrow, and all the courage that Canadians have exhibited over the last 14 months since the pandemic began.

What will not come before the court, and will not be reported in the news, is the theological position that lays beneath this lawsuit. As a consequence, neither will a countering theology which is well serving all religious groups observing the public health orders be presented. But I think it is very important that we attempt to understand how our actions at Charleswood United Church are based on what we believe and so I want to offer a theological reflection on this issue to you.

One Baptism

The first thing to say is that it is not necessary to stand in judgement of the churches who have gone to court no matter how much we may disagree with them. I take no delight in decrying the actions of another Christian's community. But neither must we stand aside and let false witness of what the Gospel calls us to do go unchallenged. Paul says in Ephesian 4 "There is one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God of all, over all, through all, and in all." We are united with the dissenting churches, here and elsewhere, by our common humanity. They are no less Christian than we are. And they are no more Christian than we are.

But they are mistaken.

A Biblical Basis

All theology must find its foundation in scripture. It is true that worship, and the freedom to worship, is a fundamental value of Christian community. In each of the ten times that Moses goes before Pharaoh to plead for the freedom of Israel, he says that the reason they must be set free is so that they may worship. A multitude of psalms testify to the inherent joy of praise and invite us to worship the Lord in gladness (i.e. Psalm 100). A boy Jesus asks his parents "Did you not know that I was bound to be in my Father's house?" when they lose him in Luke 2. And one can easily argue that the upsetting of the tables in the temple, found in all four Gospels, is a profound demonstration that Jesus loved the Temple and longed for its integrity as a place of worship. We are not angered by things that mean nothing to us.

But scripture is also abundantly clear that the place and manner of worship are not dictated by God but are a matter of our choice. In an often quoted passage Jesus tells his disciples that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there" (Matthew 18:20). In an even more poignant occasion Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman in John 4. They discuss where authentic worship should take place, in Jerusalem or at Jacob's well. Challenging the either/or nature of the conversation Jesus says, "The time is coming, indeed it is already here, when true worshippers will worship God in spirit and in truth". In other words, worship is a matter of the heart and not of location or style. To declare one's own church as the only faithful way of worshipping not only contravenes the third commandment (worship God alone) but the ninth (bearing false witness) as well.

The Greatest Commandment

When a question meant to expose Jesus as an inauthentic teacher is posed by a Pharisee in Matthew 22, Jesus responds by saying that the greatest commandment is to "Love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind...and to love your neighbour as yourself". Both things. Not one or the other.

No one should question the love of God in the people of the dissenting churches but it is difficult to see how their actions in defying public health orders during a pandemic exhibit any measure of love of neighbour. Their defiance of the Chief Public Health Officer, their disdain for medical authorities and local public opinion, their confrontations with law enforcement officials, and the language of their protests all demonstrate a deep and abiding disregard for neighbour. Their insistence on continuing to worship in such a fashion that endangers the people in their community, at the store, in places of work, and even in their own households is no measure of mercy or grace.

Drawing Conclusions

We really are in this together. An utterly indiscriminating virus has made it so. Sacrifices made by hundreds of churches in Manitoba are no greater than those made by countless schools, workplaces, small businesses, restaurants, sports teams, youth clubs, concert venues, theatres, community organizations, and other faith groups. Believing in God does not grant anyone an exemption from the ways of microbiology. And of course we agree that faith is essential. But we are no less a church, no less a Christian community, no less a people at worship simply because we are online and encouraging one another to do what is in the public interest.

Please pray for people who have succumbed to their fear and anxiety. At a time when God would draw ever closer to them they seem intent on pushing God further away.

Grace and peace,

Michael