

Church Multiplication
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017
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Text: Acts 2

- Are you supposed to go to church? are you supposed to go to Hope Church?

Do you have an answer? Do you want to know my answer? Do you want to know God's answer?!

Wait 10 minutes, and you can see what you think of the answers I offer.

But in the meantime, I want to tell you that I've been thinking a lot lately about paradigms – sounds exciting, doesn't it? paradigms! – crazy stuff! But it IS interesting, really. A paradigm gives you a framework for how you perceive things, how you interpret and understand what you encounter in life. It could be as simple, for example, as my paradigm about John Schmidt – here in the choir: if I have a paradigm in mind that John is a pleasant person, that paradigm will influence me to view everything John does with a positive spin; but if I have in mind that John is a despicable human being, then that framework this will color my perception of whatever he does...I can tell you later what my actual paradigm for John Schmidt is :)

That's an example on an individual level, but really a paradigm is a much broader, deeper sort of framework that one brings to life – paradigms are passed on to us and formed in us through a lifetime. And the power of a paradigm is not only that it shapes our perceptions, but also our actions and even our imagination – shapes what we think is possible. We carry paradigms for culture and country, for race and religion, for gender and politics. I've been trying to examine and critique some of my paradigms, but it's tough work – our paradigms become so much the air we breathe that it's tough to even recognize they are there, let alone to have some new winds blow.

The book of Acts can be seen as a paradigm for the Church – it is the narrative of the community that forms as followers of the Risen and Ascended Jesus Christ – and certain norms and practices develop in this community that is the Church. But I have in mind a different paradigm yet, that I believe is often the lens through which this founding story of the Church is seen – and that is the theological paradigm that sees Acts telling about a community of people who are being saved from God’s judgment and being saved to heaven. That has become a deeply engrained Christian paradigm, and it influences how the story of the Church is seen then and what the Church is about now. Last week in Acts we heard about 3000 people “saved” it says; this week we hear the numbers continue to increase. So the established theological paradigm would tell us that there are now 3000+ saved from God’s judgment to heaven, and there is the rest of the world still to save – clearly work to be done! Use this theological paradigm as you read I Peter, and you’ll read it as people rescued from God’s wrath into safety; use this paradigm as you hear the Gospel of John, and you’ll be certain to see a Gate into heaven, and you’ll probably see the Church as the gatekeeper.

We could stick with that theological paradigm – it’s been the Christian air to breathe for a long time. But, just for kicks, what if we looked back to last week in Acts and listen to Peter say: “save yourselves from this wicked generation”...wait, I thought God was supposed to save us from God’s wrath?! - someone quick hide that text, I hear a paradigm collapsing! Today in Acts we read about the growing number of those “who were being saved” – which concludes a passage about fellowship, prayer, generosity, community, joy and goodwill...which seems then to be what “being saved” is about. In I Peter we read that Christ bears our sins so that we can live for righteousness and suffer for what is right: so the saving God does is from human brokenness to a life that reflects God’s goodness. In John 10, the shepherd’s gate saves the sheep from the harm of deceptive voices – so the sheep are saved from the world’s deadly and destructive powers...saved “that they might have life, abundantly” – that’s what it says! Can you hear, see, imagine, a different paradigm – something about being saved from the powerful ways of death and saved to the true way of life?

There has been for a good while in the contemporary church a paradigm of church multiplication – and it seems in our own little RCA denomination, this idea of church multiplication got a lot of traction when there was anxiety about decline in church numbers: a need to save the RCA from decline – we need more people! But when this paradigm is based on the need to save people from God’s judgment and to heaven, there are some problems – because inevitably it turns out that the church makes itself in to the Gate and the judge, seeking to purify church from what it decides is wrong in the world. It is a paradigm fundamentally rooted in anxiety, saving people from hell and keeping the church alive – and it does this while never confessing the church’s own sins of exclusion and hierarchy and racism and injustice and violence – sins which one could imagine as actually being at the root of the church’s decline.

What if we would look to the Book of Acts to learn about church multiplication – but look with a paradigm of being saved from the power of death and to the ways of life? In Acts 2, here’s what I see multiplying: multiplying the understanding, learning, of God’s wisdom; multiplying the fellowship of true community; multiplying the sacraments that feed us in God’s grace; multiplying the miracle of God’s Spirit at work in people’s lives; multiplying generosity and equity and abundance; multiplying joy and praise AND multiplying good will with all! – can you even imagine the church having a good reputation with all people?! (check our poll numbers!).

And if all this kind of multiplying just looks to be nice things but not a lot of substance, I would say look again: this is being saved from the deadly “wisdom” of the world that purveys violence and fear; saved from the false divisions between peoples and nations; saved from a denial of God’s Spirit at work in the world; saved from the false pursuit of accumulation and excess; saved from the false relationships of hierarchy and control; saved from the false power of despair. Here in Acts we see the Church as witness to how God in Christ saves from the ways of death into the ways of life - that is what the Risen Christ multiplies: life! - that is the church multiplication that Acts describes to us: a community saved from the death within and around them into the ways of life.

So I'm ready answer those questions: Are you supposed to go to church? are you supposed go to Hope Church? (and turns out the answer may be bad for a Pastor's job security - sorry Jill and Beth and staff!). The answer is: NOPE! I like church - I like you and others going - but turns out God loves you either way. The point is not going here, the point is what is going on here - I have seen tiny churches packed with life, and big churches purveying deadly paradigms. You don't have to go church, instead the church should be a place people want to be because they see and hear and feel life - because their imaginations are stirred to receive and share life as children of God; a place of honesty which names the deadliness we suffer in and that we are complicit in; a place in in which the Spirit of life will multiply learning and wisdom and fellowship and grace and miracles and generosity and equity and abundance and joy and praise and good will with all. You don't have to go, but God has formed the church to be a place to be touch this world with salvation: Christ overcoming the ways of death and forming the ways of life - and that's a good place to be.

Aren't paradigms exciting?! Especially when we have deadly ones collapse and lively ones take shape. We have been called by God in Christ into the multiplication of life - and we have been called to Hope Church for God to reveal to us just what good news "being saved" really is for all God's children: a community where the Risen Christ will nourish life within; where the Spirit will shape our imagination for what is possible with God - the miracle of God's saving grace at work each day in our lives and in this world loved by God. Thanks be to God. Amen.