

## Twentieth after Pentecost

October 26, 2014

Barrhaven United Church

Psalm 90 (*sung, VU 806, verses 1-3, 6*)  
Matthew 22:34–40

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### What is Church?

For three Sundays in November, you are invited, and requested, to participate in a visioning exercise about the future of Barrhaven United Church. We want you to share with each other your vision of the future of Barrhaven - now, next year, in five — 10 — 20 years.

What do you think matters in our common life together? Where should we put our energy, our time, talent and money? What do we want to experience in worship? What do we think we should know about our traditions, sacred texts, liturgy? What do we mean by prayer? And when and who should do it? What do we owe to others in the larger community? How do we make partnerships with those whose traditions and values are different from ours? Or even should we?

How we answer these questions and even more crucially, how we frame the questions, will determine what kind of church Barrhaven is in the months and years to come. So our visioning time together is crucial for our common life together.

This morning, I want us to think about a question that underlies our visioning. How we answer it shapes everything else that we do and we are. And that question is: what is Church?

When the Torah experts came to Jesus and asked him what mattered about the faith he said: love God, love your neighbour, love yourself. He had an answer right off the top of his head without having to think about it.

If I asked you "*what is church?*" could you answer? Is the answer there without having to think about it? *What is church?* What is Starbucks? Chapters Indigo? the Independent? Blackberry, Ford? *What is church?* What is Nike, Barrhaven Cineplex, Ottawa Citizen, CTV, MacDonalds? *What is church?*

Don't feel bad if you don't have a fast answer. It's a sign of the time in which we live that 'what is church?' is not an easy question to answer. There was a time, not so long ago as we think of things in religion - 100 years or so -when that question was easy. Everyone would have an answer and everyone would have, more or less, the same

answer. But every five hundred years or so, we go through the great rummage sale. We put everything on the table and we decide whether to keep it or not.

The last one was the Reformation. Indulgences, confession, forgiveness and absolution, only through the priest, scripture read in Latin - these came off the table. We don't even notice that they aren't there. Our old answers to what is church may still be somewhere on the table or they may have already been discarded. We are in the process of figuring out what church is for us and what it will be in the future - probably about the next 400 years or so of future.

Not a small or insignificant job. That's part of what our visioning exercise is about. 'What is church' is a question that underlies all our visioning questions.

So what is Church? Church is sacred space. It's the one definition that has lasted through 2000 years and 3 rummage sales. I think it will last through this one too. Church is sacred space. What does sacred space mean? Sacred space has two dimensions.

First, it's where we meet the holy, the divine, the transcendent. In our religious language, we expect to meet God in sacred space. It's a place where we can expect to encounter the divine and be changed by it. Sacred space, like sacrament, which we talked about last Sunday at Andrew's baptism, is an encounter with the transcendent. It points to something bigger than ourselves. And we participate in that something bigger by being there. Sacred space makes present the sacred dimension of life. That is what church is.

Second, sacred space is everywhere. Jesus was among the first to claim that God, the sacred transcendent, was everywhere and not only in the temple, synagogue or shrine.

Third, sacred space can be valued up or down by what we do and by what happens in it. The specific sacred space of church is called explicitly to value up sacred space up everywhere by training us to recognize it whenever and wherever it occurs.

We do that through memory, empathy and anticipation. Memory is our history and tradition, our texts - everything we have inherited from the past - including past sacred, holy, transcendent experiences. We bring all that with us, consciously and unconsciously into the present moment.

Empathy is how we feel and connect in the present. We feel the present through empathy. Empathy towards ourselves, others, all creation. What do we need in this moment? in this moment of self creation, what is the greatest good for us all?

How we answer that depends on anticipation and for us, anticipation includes God's desires for the greatest goodness and beauty in every moment of creation.

When church is intentionally sacred space it makes us attentive to the lure of God (the sacredness) in everything around us. The sacred is valued up. In church we train ourselves to experience the sacred in everything and everywhere.

Understanding how and where sacred space occurs can help explain why the events of Wednesday had such a deep, profound and disturbing effect, and why they have shaken us all of us in Canada so badly. Our transcendent space was violated. What happened is awful in and of itself. Where it happened made it even more terrible.

What happened on Wednesday was a violate of the sacredness of our space - the people's space - parliament, and a place of sacred memory - the war memorial. They are sacred spaces because what happens at them gives shape and identity to a people, a nation, to us.

Wednesday's events were a trespass of our tradition, history, our memory. It valued down the sacredness of our traditions, our memory our place. The hall of honour - a place of peace and thanks became a battleground. The integrity and purpose of that place was violated.

The country responded with an outpouring of empathy. We had a moment of clarity - they were not just old buildings but the heart of our community and our country.

We will take it back, restore it, heal it. We will value it up by our actions. It has already begun. The honour guard has returned to the monument. The members have returned to parliament. The citizens have returned to the hill.

Participating in sacred space of church and as church also restores us. Being here together helps us heal the breaks in our common life together. What is church? Sacred space/time. Participating in the sacred space called church prepares us to be ready to see the sacred, the presence of God, in the world around us, even on our worst days.

*c. 2014, Suzanne E. Sykes*

*sources:*

Marjorie Suchocki talks about memory, empathy, anticipation in *The Fall to Violence*. "The heart of our community and our country" is a quote from Kate Heartfield in the *Ottawa Citizen* on Thursday.

"The rummage sale" is from Phyllis Tickle's book, *The Great Emergence*.

"value up" is from George Hermanson, paraphrasing Alfred North Whitehead.