

January 8, 2017
The First Sunday after Epiphany

"WHO NEEDS THE CHURCH?"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Isaiah 1:10-20 ~ Matthew 3:13-17

You've probably heard the old joke about the preacher who was on a flight across the Atlantic when the plane began to have serious mechanical troubles and was in danger of crashing. Knowing he was a minister, someone called out to him, "Do something religious!" So he took up an offering.

I love that joke, but it also bothers me because it reflects a widespread opinion about preachers and the church. You know what many people say about the church these days, don't you? I hear it all the time. They say that we aren't relevant to people's real lives ... that we don't do enough to help people in need. They say that we're too shaming and judgmental ... that we're bound to archaic superstitions inappropriate to this enlightened age. They say that we're abusive with our power ... or too weak to make any difference ... that we're too liberal or too conservative ... that we're too exclusive or too inclusive ... or too negative ... or too greedy ... or too complacent ... or too boring. They complain that we *still* sing those stuffy old hymns ... or that we *never* sing their old favorites any more. And by far the critique that I hear most about the church is that "it's filled with hypocrites." "Well, come along!" I want to tell them, "there's room for one more."

These critiques gall me ... offered as they usually are by people who've left the church and feel the need to justify their decision to me. And when they come from church members, well, I get a little sensitive. When you're working hard to please a wide range of spiritual tastes and lead a church with never enough resources in responding to unlimited needs, it's hard to hear criticism from anybody. I don't want to hear it from my church ... I don't want to hear it from outsiders ... but I especially don't want to hear it from God!

So I can imagine how the priests in the temple in Jerusalem felt when Isaiah, their fellow priest, stood up in worship one Sabbath and said:

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? (Isaiah 1:10-12).

Well, you did, God. God initiated the rituals of Israel's worship. It was all in the covenant God made with Moses and the people way back at Mt. Sinai. The sacrifices and the holy days and the rituals of worship were God's idea ... a gift to the people so that they could maintain a close relationship with the holy one of Israel ... have their sins forgiven ... and keep the covenant in

good repair. And now according to Isaiah, God hates their worship? This isn't going to help the annual stewardship campaign! How can God set up Israel's worship to begin with, and then turn around and say, "Who needs it?"

Well, do any of us need it? Who needs the church? Well, we all might ask ourselves that sometimes. I mean, what do you say when you walk out of a two and a half hour church committee meeting unsure of whether you got anything accomplished and whether it made any difference whether or not you were there? What do you think when you read a story in the newspaper about a denomination fighting over who is in and who is out of their most favored ranks? What do you feel when one of your own fellow church members says something that offends or hurts you? What comes to mind when you work hard to initiate a mission project or a program and only three people show up? What's your response when your pastor talks for the hundredth time ... and even longer than usual ... about God's demand for social justice ... when you've heard it all before? I can well imagine that you say, "Who need the church?"

But let me ask you this, what do you say when your doctor gives you a bad diagnosis and you're scheduled for surgery tomorrow? Don't you say, "I need the church!" What do you say when you meet your soul mate and you want God to bless your life together? What is the answer when you feel far from God and alone and forgotten? What do you need when your family is far away and you have nobody else in the world? What comes to you when you need music to lift your spirit and words to encourage you ... and ritual to express the mystery that cannot be contained by words? And what do you do when you find some people in desperate need ... and you want to help ... but you don't have the resources to do it by yourself? Where do you turn when death knocks at the door and you need support for your family in its hour of grief? Where do you go to be part of something that's greater than you ... longer than your life ... larger than your personal vision? I think it's a safe bet that you say "I need the church!"

We do need the church. We may have a love/hate relationship with it ... as we do with other institutions like government or banks or education ... that both sustain and oppress us. But you and I need the church. It's not our only connection with God ...but it's a profound source. It is not our only opportunity for service ... but it may be the best. It is not a perfect institution ...but we know that from the outset ... because we confess that we are all sinners here in need of God's help. But you cannot make the church better by abandoning it. The only way to make the church what it ought to be is to join it. I mean to join it ... to take ownership ... to participate in shaping what it becomes ... to understand that you are the church ... not only when you are here worshipping God and enjoying these friends ... but you are the church when you are out there doing Jesus' work in whatever you do.

We continually wrestle with keeping the gospel alive within the institution. Jesus had the same challenge with his own spiritual institutions ... with the Scribes and the Pharisees. But Jesus knew who he was since his baptism ... since today's Gospel passage ... since John immersed him in water ... and the heaven of God opened and God's own Spirit alit upon Jesus ... tethering within the creation the Trinitarian connection that has, in truth, existed since before time. Today, God's own voice names Jesus, saying, "You are my Son, with whom I am well-pleased."

And hear this ... if you never hear another single word I say ... we too are God's beloved. That too is our identity. And for us, Baptism is not a simply a mechanism for forgiveness but rather it announces God's favor and establishes our identity ... it is about our commissioning ... the inauguration of our mission and ministry ... and the assurance of God's presence.

We fulfill our commission most often through the church. But what is the mission of the church? Is it to create a museum of God's artifacts ... to establish a society of perfect people unstained by the world? No, the church should be actively seeking people who are missing in action, the tax collectors and sinners, the despised and rejected, the lonely and forgotten and endangered. But even Jesus couldn't finish that work all by himself and neither can we ... we need the church!

Researchers have noted that the church is in trouble with the younger generations in America. Our parent's generation built institutions with their time and money and commitment across the years. Many in the younger generations have more of a consumer approach to the church. They expect the church to be there for them without any significant contribution from them of time or money or labor. They go where the programs meet their needs but don't feel compelled to shape and sustain the institution to meet others' needs. They want the church to be there for the significant moments of their lives ... for births and deaths and for Christmas music. But the rest of the time they figure, who needs the church? Of course, it goes without saying that the church won't be here for their children and grandchildren if they don't keep it going in the meantime.

Jesus conflict with the gatekeepers of an institutionalized God had a precedent in the prophets. Isaiah suggests that God has a love/hate relationship with institutional religion, too. But the Bible also says God needs the church, and therefore guarantees its future. God needs the church to be the prophetic voice speaking truth to power when power abuses and oppresses. God needs the church to be the hands and feet and eyes and ears and mouth and heart of Christ ... his body in the world ... animated by his Spirit ... to finish his work. God needs the church to make God's love real to every person ... because God always comes in person to love us. God needs the church, and the Bible promises that gates of hell will not stand against it.

But listen, God doesn't have to hold on to any particular church or expression of the church or style of the church. In fact, God doesn't need all of what is called the church today and that's where Isaiah's word of warning applies.

Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation-- I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood (Isaiah 1:12-15).

God doesn't need the church that is self-impressed and proud. God doesn't need the church that excuses materialism in the name of some prayer proof-texted out of the scripture and published in a leather bound bestselling edition. God doesn't need the church that pretends to be holy but robs people of their dignity. God doesn't need the church that talks about justice but wants special protection. God doesn't need the church that is holier than thou for one hour on Sunday but meaner than hell the rest of the week. God doesn't need the church that is all worship and no

service ... all image and no substance ... all wind and no sail ... all hallelujah and no let me help you ... all me and no us ... all us and no them ... all up and no down ... all in and no out ... all meeting and no mattering ... all head and no heart ... all attitude and no gratitude ... all talk and no walk! The truth is that God doesn't need our worship, our prayer, our praise, our music, our words, or our attention ... *if* they are not also connected to the way we live and speak and act and relate to one another ... and the world ... the rest of the time.

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:16-17).

Yes, God needs the church. But I'm not talking about the church that forgives its own sins with an easy grace ... that presumes it is God's last and only hope in the world ... that uses its faith to feel good about itself while condemning others. God doesn't need that church. The world doesn't need that church. You and I don't need that church. *And we are not that church!*

I believe that we are a church that worships God in spirit and in truth. We are a church that feeds the hungry and houses the homeless. We are a church that makes its members know they are affirmed and beloved of God. We are a church whose conversation about holiness is not shaming and degrading but a loving call to growth, maturity, and wholeness. We are a church that draws people close to God to find God's forgiveness and nurture and constant care. We are a church that doesn't claim to have all the answers but knows how to ask the questions. We certainly aren't perfect ... because I say again, we confess that we are all sinners here in need of God's help ...but we are a church that wants to do even better ... that has committed to take the next year to be actively and passionately engaged in seeking what is missing ... in finding those who are lost ... in searching out what God is doing ... and joining God in doing it! Because that's the church we need ... that's the church the world needs ...that's the church God loves. Beloved friends, let us strive always to be that church!

May we pray?

Jesus, friend of sinners, by your presence within us and among us shape us day by day into the church you want us to be. Make our worship and our service one and pleasing in your sight so may this and every church truly become the body of Christ we remember in this place and know by Jesus' name. Amen.