

Upending our Tables

A sermon loosely connected to John 2:13-22 by Nathan Nettleton, 7 March 2021

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Message

In determining our church's way forward, we need to discern who we exist to serve, and it shouldn't just be ourselves.

Sermon

I need to confess upfront that this sermon is only very loosely connected to any of the Bible readings we have just heard. Normally I try to ground my preaching in a solid engagement with at least one of the readings, but tonight, the guts of my sermon was going to be preached regardless of the readings, and I was just happy to find some sort of connection.

Last Tuesday night when our Host Group (church council) met, they concluded that even though the discussion paper I had sent out about possible futures for our church ran to more than 3500 words, the idea of discerning a whole new mission for the church had not been developed sufficiently to really get people thinking about it. Lying awake in bed later that night, wondering whether I might be able to write a second paper this week while also preparing a sermon, I suddenly thought, "Maybe the sermon and the second discussion paper are one and the same thing."

So this is either a wise and inspired way of using the pulpit to help the church grapple with the big questions about its future, or it is just the pastor trying to feed two birds with one scone so as to leave himself more free time to go out drinking beer and playing cards. You be the judge!

Let me start with my loose connection to the gospel story about Jesus causing havoc in the temple. In what may have been either a spontaneous outburst of anger, or a carefully thought out symbolic protest, Jesus upends the tables, sets animals running every which way, and effectively shuts down the whole temple system for the day. He demands that the people stop and think about what the Temple exists for. He even cryptically suggests that perhaps they should tear the whole thing down and let him show them how to start again from scratch.

Well, today, I want to turn over a few of our tables and ask us to consider what we exist for. The pandemic year has probably already torn everything down to the ground. But before we hastily try to prop it back up, that tearing down seems to demand that we stop and think about what it is that we are trying to raise up here. Even if we protest that this church has been a work in progress for 167 years, Jesus might still be telling us to tear it down and let him start all over with us.

Most of our thinking so far about the post-pandemic future of our church has understandably focussed on questions of what can we resume, and when and how. Can the worship services we have known and loved resume in the church building, or will they now be permanently online, or can we achieve some sort of satisfactory combination of the two?

What we haven't asked ourselves very much is "what do we, as a church, exist for in the first place?" Who are we here to serve? Who are the beneficiaries of what we do as a church, and

who would be worse off if we stopped doing it altogether and just closed down? Why are we here?

In the past twelve months, the tables have been upended all around us. Perhaps in the chaos and disruption, Jesus is standing in the midst of us yelling, “Stop! Think! What are you turning my Father’s house into? Don’t just pick the old tables up. They needed to be overturned. What can we build together in place of these obsolete ruins?”

These “what for” questions are mission questions. Whose needs are we seeking to serve? How are we making the world a better place, and for who? We have struggled to answer those questions for even longer than I’ve been here, and that’s nearly 27 years. We’ve been through periods of intentionally putting aside the questions while we focussed on ensuring that we had a congregational life that was nourishing and strengthening us, because without that we certainly had nothing to offer anyone else.

When we emerged from those periods, we still struggled to answer the question. We have mostly settled on two partial answers. Firstly, we have said that the resources provided on our website are a valued service to the wider church, and that’s true, but in terms of our collective engagement in mission, that simply means that you pay me to undertake that mission for you.

Secondly, we have said that our common life, prayer and ministry are forming and nurturing our members for the various missions and ministries they are engaged in elsewhere, through their homes, work places, voluntary associations, or other spheres of Christian ministry. That’s also true, and whatever emerges on the other side of all this, I hope that that will still be true. But is it enough? Because as an expression of our collective identity and purpose, it still says that the main intended beneficiaries are ourselves. It is about meeting our own needs. Others benefit indirectly through what each of us does elsewhere, and that’s important, but they’re not really who we are thinking about, praying for, or serving. Mostly that’s ourselves.

And I seriously wonder whether our lengthy period with such an inward focus isn’t the most likely explanation of the decline we have seen over the last few years. It’s true that our numbers haven’t dropped terribly much, and that we have even picked up some new people over the past 12 months, but a larger and larger percentage of the congregation are people who have put a huge amount of energy and work into churches for decades, and who deserve to be allowed to step back and see the work get picked up by waves of people who are newer to the church. But Uncle Den is the only new person to have joined our Host Group in the past 11 years, and he doesn’t represent an influx of youth.

Six years ago, we had 25 people under the age of 45 on the church roll. Now we’ve got five: Rita, Tseyi, Acacia, Tara and Lior. Dom for a few more months if you want to stretch it. And yes, I know that Paul Gahan claimed he was turning 27 last Thursday, but that’s because he wound the odometer back to zero when he turned 45!

Now, last time I commented on this trend a few people panicked and thought that I was wanting to get rid of the oldies. Nothing could be further from the truth. You can’t fix a lack of younger people by getting rid of the older people. In fact in a few minutes I’m going to speculate on the paradoxical possibility that the answer might be to deliberately seek out more older people.

But what I do want to suggest is that if we are slowly declining, and our congregational life is almost entirely oriented towards meeting our own needs, then we are doomed to die. And perhaps deservedly so. I'm not pointing the finger at any of you about this. I've been the pastor here for decades, so this has happened on my watch, and as the key leader, I have to carry the lion's share of the responsibility for where we are at.

But where we are at is looking a lot like what we pastors sometimes refer to as a palliative care church. That's not a church full of elderly people. You can have a flourishing church full of elderly people and a palliative care church full of young families, although that second one would easily delude itself that all is well. A palliative care church is a church that is slowly dying and whose activities are almost entirely oriented towards giving itself a measure of comfort and quality of life as it approaches its inevitable end.

We could stay online, return to worshipping in the church, or some creative hybrid, and still not have thought anything new about who we are serving other than ourselves. We could be doing it beautifully, and still be in palliative care mode, just looking after ourselves wonderfully while our church slowly dies around us. And Jesus will probably be standing among our upturned tables yelling "Stop making my father's house a self-care hospice! Tear it down, and in three days I will raise up something new in its place."

So what is the alternative? What could be raised up in its place?

Well, here's one way of tackling that question. It is more or less agreed now that our online worship will be continuing. Whether there will also be a physically gathered worshipping group is an open question – some of you are trying a version of it at the church tonight – but however that question resolves, it seems certain that the online will continue. The discussion paper last week identified five different categories of people who have not normally been well served by churches, but who are significantly advantaged by our style of online worship. So the simple answer to the mission question is to prayerfully discern whether God is calling us to re-orient our approach to church towards intentionally reaching out to and serving one or more of these five groups.

At risk of skewing the conversation in one direction, let me choose one of the five by way of example and try to offer a snap-shot of what it might look like for us to make serving that group the missional focus of our congregational life. The first group named on our list was people whose declining mobility prevents them getting out to participate in church life and worship. Many of these are elderly, and are living in care facilities or with support in their own homes. So I'm going to use this group as my example, not just because they were the first and most obvious on our list, but also because I love the quirky paradox of thinking about revitalising an ageing declining church by deliberating seeking to reach out to more older declining people!

A couple of months back, there was a Sunday when Acacia connected into our online Sunday worship service on her laptop from a holiday house accompanied by her 90 year old grandma. Grandma hadn't worshipped with us before, but she loved it. And I think Acacia enjoyed enabling Grandma to participate too.

That picture got me wondering. What if, for a number of us, our normal Sunday church-going wasn't to drive to the church, or just connect from home, but to head to an aged care

facility to connect in worship with two or three residents there who we had befriended and who now wanted to worship with us regularly? Could you take a laptop and a microphone and connect them to a television screen there, and provide a candle and some bread and wine, and then the little group of you participate in this worship service from there? Instead of twenty five Zoom boxes mostly only containing one or two people, there could be quite a few with three or four people, only one of whom needs to know how to connect up and control the mute button.

We already have two or three people among us who do some regular volunteer visiting in aged care facilities. Not only is that a point of connection we already have, but perhaps there are more of us who could start doing that, befriending and regularly visiting residents. Perhaps there might even be a few retirees among us who might commit to moving into a retirement village or care facility a few years earlier than they otherwise would have in order to be a missional presence there on behalf of the church. Perhaps the political agitators among us might get involved in advocating around some of the systemic failures revealed in the recent Royal Commission into aged care.

Some of you may be seeing an obvious hole in this idea. Building up our numbers of frail elderly people is not going to help replenish the pool of people who have the energy and mobility to do the work. Wouldn't we just end up with all of us in care and no one left to do the caring, the outreach, and the running of the liturgies and other activities?

Perhaps, but we might be surprised. Often when a small church does a really good job of intentionally ministering to the needs of a particular needful group, other people turn up, attracted by both the strong sense of identity and purpose, and by the opportunity to get involved in that mission themselves. And sometimes it's a direct spin off. We may find that there are people who are drawn to us because they have been inspired by the beautiful job we've done of engaging and caring for their frail grandparents.

And when people connect into our worship from places where other people live and work, you never know who is tuning in without revealing themselves. Alison has been telling me that they have noticed this with their online services at Sanctuary where they have a number of people who live in shared households with others who would never have been seen dead turning up to church, but some of whom have been quite regularly sitting off camera and listening in since they went online.

The healthiest church growth usually comes as a by-product of other things, not from directing all our energy and attention into trying to recruit and grow.

Now, the picture I've just painted relates to just one of those five groups. I'm not going to redo the sermon for each of the others in turn, but please remember that we could just as easily start with one of the others, or with two or three of them.

Could something like this really happen? Sure it could. All it takes are a few people willing to give it a go and get started. The only way we will find out whether we are really being called to reach out to one or more of these five groups is to see who has some passion to get something started. If we find things starting to happen around one of them, that would seem to be the call. If we find that we have two or three little groups picking up different ones,

great. Two or three it is. If we find that we have nothing, then perhaps we are past the point of no return as a palliative care church, but I really don't believe that's the case.

I know there are ideas and energies among you. I've heard some of you get excited about such things. Well it is time to name those things out loud and see who else might be ready to join you. You don't need permission from me or from the Host Group. The group that are experimenting tonight with gathering back at the church to connect in to this service as a group didn't need permission either. I only heard yesterday that they were planning to do it, and I was very pleased that I was just being informed instead of being asked for permission or blessing. If you've got something you'd like to see tried, speak up and try it. Just make your idea known, and see who will come with you.

Massive disruptions give us the invitation and the opportunity for massive rethinks. That invitation and opportunity is now awaiting our responses. It could be very exciting. But if we turn our backs on that invitation and opportunity, and try to just resurrect the slowly declining business as usual that we had before, or even just replicate it beautifully in an online version without actively seeking to serve anyone new, then the chances are that Jesus is going to barge in here, upending the tables, stampeding the animals, and demanding to know what we think we have turned his Fathers house into.