

Who is Jesus and What is a Disciple?

Part 8: Strike the Tent

Text: Daniel 7:9

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In the fall of 1870, an old soldier lay dying. General Robert E. Lee had been delirious for several days: drifting in and out of consciousness and sometimes mumbling nonsense. It sounded like he was issuing commands, as if the Civil War was still raging and he was once again on the battlefield. Suddenly, on October 12, his eyes opened and General Lee said, "Strike the tent!" Then he died.

It was an order which Lee had frequently issued. You see, an army is often on the move. If you stay in one place for too long, you're a sitting duck for the enemy. You travel light with tent and backpack, you make camp for a while, but then you strike the tent, you pull up the stakes, you pack-up your few possessions and you're once again on the march.

That's the way it is with an army, and that's the way it should be with the Church. There's work to do, new challenges to meet, a Kingdom to build. And none of that is going to happen if the Church stays in one place for too long.

Strike the tent! That's what we have to do from time to time. A faithful Church is on the move, following Jesus into the future.

Students of history will recall that the king himself use to lead his troops into battle. William the Conqueror, the Norman King, lead his troops at the Battle of Hastings and became King of England. Robert the Bruce, King of Scotland, led his troops in battle as he solidified his reign over the land of the heather. The king use to lead his troops into battle. Well, Jesus is our King. That's one of the biblical images for Jesus: prophet, priest and *king*. Jesus is our King, but he sits on a rather unique throne. It's like the throne depicted in Daniel 7:9: "His throne was fiery flames, *and its wheels were burning fire.*"

Jesus' throne has *wheels* on it. Which means that the *Church* of Jesus Christ needs wheels too. To be the Church – to be faithful disciples of Jesus – you have to be on the *move*.

Whether the people of God should be mobile or stationary has been a point of contention for 3000 years. You can see the debate going back and forth through the pages of the Bible. We see one part of that debate in today's Psalm. The psalmist depicts King David saying, "I will not sleep until I find a dwelling place for God" (Psalm 132:3-5). You see, at that point, around 1000 BC, God didn't have a permanent home. The Hebrew people – the people over whom King David ruled – believed that God lived in something called The Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was a box that contained the Ten Commandments. And during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the Hebrew people carried the Ark with them. Their God was literally on the move. And when they stopped for a while, they set-up this tent-like structure called the Tabernacle. The Ark

was placed in the Tabernacle, and that became their place of worship. And when the time came to move on, they packed up the tent and picked up the Ark and resumed their journey.

For maybe 300 years, since Moses first received the Ten Commandments, that's the way it was. But then along came King David, and he decided that God needed a home. "Our traveling days are over," David said. "We have *arrived*," he said, "right here in Jerusalem. So I'm building a palace for myself and a temple for God. We don't need that flimsy tabernacle, because we don't have to be on the march anymore."

That was one side of the debate. But the other side said, "Wait a minute. Did God ask you to build him a house, David?" No! God already has a perfectly good dwelling place; it's the Tabernacle." They said, "We worship a God not of a particular place, but a God who is on the march; a God whose truth and mission are marching on." (See 2 Samuel 7:4-7 for this side of the temple debate.)

Back and forth through the pages of scripture we see this debate; like two movements of Beethoven's 5th symphony battling against each other. The debate raged, until we come to John 1:14, where it says that the Word of God became flesh in Jesus the Christ and *tented* among us. The word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us. Our English Bibles say the Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us, but the word in the original Greek text is literally translated *tabernacled*. In other words, Jesus is part of that biblical tradition that says, "God is not cooped up in some Temple somewhere; no, God is on a journey. God's dwelling place is a tent, and the name of that tent is Jesus Christ, and the Church of Jesus Christ is on the move!"

But you know what? If the Church is on the move, it has to have fuel. An army on the march must be well fed; it has to have fuel. A diesel locomotive pulling a heavy freight train along the CPR tracks just south of here has to have fuel. When you take your car out on a road trip for a holiday and you pull into a gas station, it's not good enough to pat your car on the hood and say, "You're doing a great job, car." No, if you're going to make it to your destination, you have to have fuel.

A Church on the move must have fuel. And that fuel, my brothers and sisters, is your gifts. Your financial and spiritual gifts. Your time, your talent and your treasure. We can't be like that church which the late comedian Flip Wilson once depicted where the minister was saying, "If the church is going to go somewhere, first it has to crawl."

And someone in the congregation said, "Let it crawl, Rev, let it crawl."

Then the minister said, "But after crawling for a while, the church gets to walking."

And a few more people shouted, "Let it walk, Rev; let it walk."

Now the minister's getting fired up and he says, "After walking for a bit, the Church has got to run!"

And a bunch of people are on their feet shouting, "Let it run, Rev; let it run."

The minister's dancing around and he says, "In order to run, the church has to have *money!*"

And the whole congregation jumps up, and in one voice they say, "Let it crawl, Rev; let it crawl."

Friends, it doesn't work that way. A church on the move has to have fuel. *This* church, in order to move, must have your time, talent and treasure. Knox United Church needs your spiritual and financial gifts. God gave you those gifts so that you, in turn, would generously give those gifts to others. It's not like a Christmas gift which you open up and you say, "Thank you," and you then you stick it in a closet and you never see it again. No, the spiritual and financial gifts which God has given us are intended to be given away over and over and over again. Every time they're given away, it's more fuel for the Church.

And make no mistake about it: we *all* have gifts which we are called to give away. *You* have gifts. You are a *gifted* person.

Our neighbour out here at the corner of Rural and Midland has a couple of pretty good sized dogs. They must be Rottweilers or something. Anyway, I was out for a walk the other day and the two dogs were in the backyard. So I stopped at the fence and I said, "Hello, puppy dogs." And the "puppy dogs" said, "Grrrrr!" I decided to keep moving. But then something really interesting happened. As I walked along the fence the one dog walked with me, keeping himself between me and the house, while the other dog ran onto the porch and guarded the back door; in case I tried to circle around behind the first dog and make a break for the door.

Those dogs are gifted. By instinct they have specific skills, and by training they've been able to make good use of those skills.

Well, you know what? We *all* have specific skills. St. Paul says that we all have particular gifts. Some are prophets and some are teachers; some are helpers and some are leaders (1 Corinthians 12:28). We all have particular gifts, and we are called to make good use of those gifts. When we do so – when we offer those gifts to God – it's like fuel for the Church. The Church needs our spiritual and financial gifts if it's going to move.

And there is *joy* in offering such gifts; there is *joy* in giving. That weekly contribution to the church, that committee that you're working on – if it's something that you're passionate about – there is joy in giving.

The joy comes in part because you're trusting God. And you know that in the past when you've trusted God, great things have happened. I mean, when you put that envelope on the offering plate each Sunday – when you give God the first and the best of your financial resources on that *first* day of the week – you're trusting that God will give you adequate resources to get through the *rest* of the week.

And it works! More often than not, it works. I've been trying to practice first fruits giving for the better part of 15 years now. Not waiting 'til the end of the year to see what I have left and giving God the leftovers; no, giving God the first and the best of what I have to offer and trusting that there will be enough left over for *me*. And you know what? I haven't missed a meal yet. Haven't been homeless for one night yet. Now, like a lot of United Church folk, I may find myself scrambling to get caught up throughout the fall, but even then, when maybe I'm putting a bit extra on the plate, I still don't go hungry. In fact, it's not like during the rest of the week the financial situation is even flat-lined; no, the blessings *abound*.

It's like this: My first Christmas in Canada I gave my parents a Hudson's Bay blanket. I wanted to give them something real Canadian, so I gave them a Hudson's Bay blanket to keep them nice and warm. And it was a joy to do that.

In July my parents moved into a retirement home; where they keep the thermostat nice and high. So last month my mother handed me this package. And it was that same Hudson's Bay blanket; freshly cleaned and looking like new. *And*, they gave me this wonderful quilt as well; which was made by the women of Danbury, Nebraska and given to my Grandmother Ervin 75 years ago. It's been a treasured part of our family ever since.

Jesus said, "Give, and it will be given to you. A full measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back" (Luke 6:38). That, and more. The gifts not only return to you; they multiply. There is joy in giving. There is joy in placing your life in God's hands and finding that over and over again, when you do so, the blessings abound.

In a minute, we will all have an opportunity to complete the commitment cards which you have received. The top of the card is the place where you can indicate the spiritual gifts – the skills and talents – that you're prepared to offer to God and the Church in 2010, and the bottom of the card is the place to indicate the financial gift that you're prepared to offer to God and the Church next year. We'll take a few minutes now so that you can fill out your commitment cards; or, if you've already done so, you can use these few minutes to ask God for the grace and the discipline to make good on your commitment throughout the coming year. Ross will play some reflective music for a bit. When he stops, the ushers will pick up your commitment card.

But first, one more thing: As you fill out those cards, think of the tradition in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island; the old Maritime tradition: when there are guests at the dinner table, the rule is, "Family go slow." The guests get the first and the best food. Think of Jesus as our guest. And he's come to lead us on a long journey. He needs the *best* food so that he can guide us into the future. Amen.