

From Fear to Opportunity
January 12, 2020 – Epiphany 1

Acts 10: 34-43

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Matthew 3: 13-17

A few months ago we learned that the City is planning an Off-leash Dog Park in Harding Park, just off of our parking lot. It was really something to hear this because at a meeting of the Regina Cluster of churches the Eastside folk had a conversation of dreams and visions for connecting with the larger neighbourhood community and a dog park was one of the ideas. (other ideas were, a coffee shop or kiosk in the narthex, a playground in the park, a community garden). While I was excited about the opportunity to connect with people who would be coming to our area, when we talked about the possibility at a staff meeting we also raised concerns about the impact on our parking during church activities and that we could lose our parking. A meeting was to be planned between the City and LSC for the beginning of the new year and we decided to wait and see what is proposed, as they may be building parking, they may have the entrance off Harding street, and it didn't make sense to get all worked up when we didn't know the plan. Sometimes we resist change when we don't know what it will look like or if it's not what we expect.

John the Baptist found himself in this situation. He did not expect to baptize Jesus, and resisted it. He felt Jesus should baptize him, because John saw Jesus as greater than him. However, Jesus saw the importance of him being baptized like everyone else, to be on equal footing with the community, to fulfill righteousness as he said. It was the just thing to do. He convinced John to baptize him, and when he did, the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit came like a dove, and a voice affirmed that Jesus is God's son whom God is pleased with. John's shift in perspective and plan was affirmed and blessed. John also had to change his perspective and expectations of who Jesus was going to be as Messiah. John expected a Messiah of judgement and revolution, but Jesus was a Messiah of love, grace, compassion, as well as judgement. He showed us that grace and judgement go hand in hand, that in order for people to hear and receive judgement they need to first receive love and forgiveness.

This also connects with John's message of repentance or metanoia. Metanoia actually means 'go into the larger mind' or 'go beyond the mind'. John had to go beyond what he was thinking to change his expectations and baptize Jesus,

releasing his old ways of seeing the world and allow a total reversal of his beliefs. What old ways of seeing the world might we need to let go of? This week the craft/study group started the book, [Church Forsaken](#), Practicing Presence in Neglected Neighbourhoods and in the introduction author, Jonathan Brooks talks about residing in the place we don't want to be. He came from Englewood in Detroit, which had a reputation of being a poor, violent neighbourhood, that he left as a young adult but found himself called by God to move back there, even though he really didn't want to. He identified that "contrary to what you may have heard about neighbourhoods like West Englewood, it's not commonplace for lives to be snatched away violently or for mothers to lose their children before they experience all that life has to offer." He found his thinking had to change as well to go beyond the mind of his usual thoughts, of how could a loving God allow such violence to happen when it does, to a question of how can such a loving community, how can I allow such evil to happen. He moved back into the community and has been a powerful force of change in building community and resilience among the people there.

If we look at the opposite of metanoia or repentance – changing our thinking to a larger mind, the opposite is not stubbornness, or pride, it is fear. How often does the church, Christianity operate from a place of fear? The fear of losing this doctrine or that dogma? The fear of leaving this tradition or that theology? The fear of others who are not like us? Have you noticed this? Have you noticed that far too many TV preachers capitalize on people's fears? Or how far too many so-called 'gospel' messages nurture fear, particularly fear of the other, fear of God, fear of death, fear of hell? Isn't much of what we are experiencing with the tensions between Iran and the US, operating out of place of fear? What fears might you operate out of? Peter had to confront his fear of change when presented with a vision that basically was telling him that God wanted him to preach to all the gentile community, not just the Jewish community. Today's passage from Acts, is his conclusion after confronting this fear, and coming into a larger mindset about preaching the good news. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God (or is in awe of God) and does what is right, is acceptable to God" (Acts 10:34-35). There is no 'other' with God. We are to welcome and love all. God's love overcomes the fear and calls us to a larger mind, to go beyond our usual thinking. Too often we can operate out of fear of change rather than openness to the opportunity it might present.

While I was excited about the potential for us regarding the dog park, I too had concerns about parking if the City was not going to build any extra parking. On Wednesday a group from the three congregations of the Living Spirit Centre, including reps from the Property and Maintenance Committee, met with two City planners to hear what they are proposing. The plans presented had the entrance to the dog park off of our parking lot and only one extra row of parking developed into the park. As we heard their plans and an openness to working with us, the one phrase that stood out for me was “what would it take” for the plans to go through. We have negotiating leverage, and by the end of the meeting we were talking about having a paved parking lot, some extra parking spots, signage, and painted lines on the lot. These are all still proposals and no decisions have been made, but there was a shift in the meeting to one of more openness to consider the access through the lot and the opportunities it could present to us. Most went beyond the thoughts of what they were originally thinking or let go of their fears to be open to other possibilities. There will be another meeting of stakeholders including the immediate neighbours on January 23 before a public meeting as the process continues which also connects with the neighbourhood and we intend to invite those neighbours to our Community Dinner that same night. May we be open to the opportunities this proposal presents us as a community of faith in this neighbourhood to connecting with others and the gains this can provide rather than the fears of what we may lose.

John the Baptist changed his perspective and mind about baptizing Jesus. May we be open to the ways that the Christ works in us and our community. May we be open to experiencing the larger mind of new insights and awareness that can deepen our faith and our community and move beyond our thinking as we face the changes before us.