**Testifying for the Neighbourhood**

May 12, 2024

1 John 5: 9-12 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Luke 19: 1-10

Two weeks ago I was in the Seattle area for the Inhabit Conference with the [Parish Collective](https://www.parishcollective.org/vision). It was a beautiful setting on the Puget Sound, in between Seattle and Tacoma. The Parish Collective is committed to embodying God’s Dream in the neighbourhood. It is about being rooted in place, where you live, where you work, where you worship. It comes out of the work that the three founders, Tim Soerens, Dwight Friesen, and Paul Sparks did in their book, [The New Parish](https://www.amazon.ca/New-Parish-Neighborhood-Transforming-Discipleship-ebook/dp/B00J8V80WC), it works to reclaim the understanding of Parish, which is the neighbourhood the church is placed in and helps us understand how to be church in the neighbourhood. The Parish Collective acknowledges that God is up to something in the neighbourhood and that we, the church, need to find out what that is, and join in.

In the opening session of Inhabit, one of the founders of the movement, Tim Soerens, named that ‘this is not a growth strategy’, to some affirming laughter in the room. As I’ve said at Eastside in my time here, whatever we do to try to reach those who are not coming Sunday morning probably won’t bring more bums in the pews! Tim continues, ‘it is not to make things happen, but a dare to live God’s dream in the neighbourhood. Parish Ministry sees the importance of systemic change and the love of Jesus”. The Inhabit Conference embodies this largely through testimony of Parish ministers sharing their stories of transformation in their neighbourhood.

Our reading from 1 John today is about testimony. Often when we hear about testimony and the church it is not something we in the United Church are too familiar with and may conjure up images of people sharing conversion stories and stories of gratitude for how God is active in our lives. The closest we come to this at Eastside is when we ask someone to share their faith story, which we used to do once a month before the pandemic, or when we share a joy or challenge during our Open Hearts Jar, for a donation to Mission and Service. Traditionally testimony in the church originating from this passage in 1 John has evolved into three types: what life was like before faith in Christ, how faith in Christ was found or developed, and what changes faith has brought to life. The testimonies at the Inhabit Conference falls into latter category – how living out our faith can transform communities. I wish to share some of these, but first I want to share with you some learnings I had from the pre-event about Strong Towns.

[Strong Towns](http://www.strongtowns.org) is an organization committed to:

1. Replace post war pattern of development with pattern of development that is financially strong and resilient.
2. Cities of all sizes to be safe, livable and inviting.
3. Work to elevate local government to be the highest level of collaboration for people working together in a place, not merely the lowest level in a hierarchy of governments.

They identify that the most productive areas in the city are the walkable neighbourhoods, communities where you can walk to get pretty much everything you need. Unfortunately, the way neighbourhoods are designed today these are the exception. I learned that there is a Strong Towns chapter in Regina, and I have reached out to connect with them. I also wonder whether we could have a Strong Towns event here, given that within our Collaboration when we talked about our WHY, much of it focused on connecting with the neighbourhood or community.

A process they shared in the workshop for connecting with the neighbourhood was:

1. Humbly observe where people in the community struggle.
2. Ask the question What is the next smallest thing we can do right now to address that struggle?
3. Do that thing. Do it right now. Don't wait for permission
4. Repeat!

An example of this was a [group in Charlotte](https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2022/11/16/mdf2022-from-fired-to-fired-up-how-one-strong-towns-member-turned-losing-his-job-into-community-success), NC who while out on a Janes Walk, noticed a lack of safety at the bus stops, in their poorest neighbourhoods. They came up with a simple idea to build a bench at the stops. They started with one, and when it wasn’t taken away and people were grateful, they built another and another and another. At one point the city told them to stop, and they asked the city if they were going to build them then. When the city said no, they continued, did a go-fund me campaign and now have installed over 100 benches. The City officials now use this a proof of concept for this kind of work. This is a concrete example of God being up to something in the neighbourhood. These folk may not have been connected to a church but they are living out God’s dream of caring for all. The Strong Towns presentation identified Isaiah 58 as an example of what God calls us to in the neighbourhood: to break the chains of injustice, get rid of exploitation in the workplace, free the oppressed, cancel debts.

Here is a sampling of some of the stories, the testimonies from the Conference. Stewart Bowerman is a pastor in the Ballard neighbourhood of Seattle, which has Emerson Park School, the only school in Seattle that uses a public playground. When the park had a shooting occur in it, the playground closed down, and was broken. Stewart [organized](https://southseattleemerald.com/2022/04/19/what-led-to-an-impending-hutchinson-park-overhaul-an-advocacy-story/) with community members, including youth who spoke at city council, and they secured a new park and playground. They are now building a soccer field because that is what the community wanted.

Joben David is director of [Jacob’s Well](https://www.jacobswell.ca/who-we-are), a welcome centre in Vancouver’s Eastside neighbourhood. He says the hero of our story isn’t any one of us but all of us. He tells the story of a member of the community died and needed to be taken back to his home reserve so he could enter the spirit world, but his wife couldn’t go as she wouldn’t go alone. The members of the community told her that they would go with her, so Joben closed the centre, rented a van and they all went North with her to honour their friend’s tradition and need.

Tahmina Martelly, is from Hillside Church in Kent Washington, the 6th most diverse community in the US. The church property had an underutilized parking lot polluted with storm water, because it floods every spring. She learned about her neighbourhood by meeting with leaders and through community listening sessions. She discovered that what they wanted was a place to grow food and to get there with public transportation. They got thousands of volunteers to depave the parking lot, over 50,000 square feet, so water would then go into the ground. They built a [community garden](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flAWeW4vDeA) in the parking lot, with thousands of volunteers building individual plots. They now have a gathered water system on the roof of church to water the gardens, and a system that collects storm water and returns it to the ground. She says Jesus shows up in unlikely places and makes it a thriving community.

There is much more to share from the conference, like Dr Brenda Salter McNeil offering a powerful presentation on reparation not being about money as much as it is about fixing what is broken. She asks the question of whether church is a noun or a verb. She was just getting going in her 20 minute time allotment, when she was given a five minute notice of time being up. Our white commitment to time-keeping overruling the importance of a powerful message.

Jonathan Brooks, chair of the Parish Collective board, and author of [Church Forsaken](https://www.amazon.com/Church-Forsaken-Practicing-Neglected-Neighborhoods/dp/0830845550) that our Eastside book study has read, gave a wonderful closing message building on Dr. Brenda’s message of reparation, based on our other reading today of Zacchaeus. After Jesus declared that salvation has come to Zacchaeus’ house because of Zacchaeus commitment to make reparations to those he has cheated, Jesus then names how we should respond to systemic injustice. Through the parable of the talents and the wicked ruler, Jesus provides a message of challenge to the system that keeps people poor. The servant who buries the masters money, and returns it all to the master, refuses to perpetuate a system of exploitation as the other servants did who returned 5 and 10 times the amount, basically through exploiting of poor. The third servant resists participating in it. Just as Zacchaeus decides to make repairs for participating in the system he had been participating in – one of corruption and skimming off the top, Jonathon asks us, what must we do in our cities and places when systems are being built to keep people poor? What must we do, while we wait? We remain, we repent, we resist, we repair, like Zacchaeus

Do not give up, he says, remain.

Do not despair, he says, things are not getting worse, they are just getting uncovered. The stories may not make sense but it is God's plan. Remain, repent, resist, repair.

Finally, the music throughout the conference was wonderful and challenging and inspiring. In the first session I was singing and tearing up and wasn’t sure why, but upon reflection, it was that the style of music and singing was like praise music but without the bad theology. The other reality was the diversity of the community, not only racially, but also denominationally. This was a wide community that steps out of our denominational silos to be community together with a common purpose. I got to know a couple who are from an Assemblies of God Church, and I did not hesitate to say, ‘my husband’, as I would have if I was in a different context. So, the music and community were amazing and gives me hope for the church. To give you a flavour of the music, our hymn will be a song we sang at the event.

May we seek out what God is up to in our neighbourhoods. May we be open to observing, asking questions, and acting on the needs of our neighbourhoods. May we commit to God’s dream of remaining, repenting, resisting and repairing. May we share testimony of God’s love in our lives and in our communities. Amen