**God Dwells in the Parish**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**October 29, 2017**

1 Kings 5: 1-5; 8: 1-13 Russell Mitchell-Walker

The past two years, The United Church of Canada has been focused on considering a number of remits or national votes to change our structure and ways of working as a church. All of these remits passed and implementation is slated to be effective as of January 1, 2019. These changes include replacing presbyteries and conferences with regional councils. All changes proposed at the 42nd General Council in 2015 were structural, with the exception of establishing a fund for new ministry initiatives, now called Embracing the Spirit which our Family Ministry program received some funding for. Some of us in the church and at the General Council meeting lamented that these changes were financially driven and there was very little discussion or focus on the church’s mission in relation to our future. Where was God in all of this? Did we just assume that God was in the structure of the church? That God would continue to be in the church as always?

Solomon, in todays reading has built the temple, taking 7 years to complete it, as the dwelling place for God. Previously it was believed that God dwelt in the Ark of the Covenant, which held the Ten Commandments and David and Solomon believed that God needed a permanent place to dwell. The text and Solomon himself contradicts this, in verses 11 & 12 where a cloud filled the temple and the priests could not minister because of it – the glory of God was in the cloud and Solomon acknowledges that God would dwell in thick darkness or cloud. In spite of this, Solomon continues and declares that he has built an exalted house for God to dwell in forever. We all know that God is not contained in the temple – indeed the temple was destroyed twice and never rebuilt after the second time. Nor is God contained in the church building. God’s mission and action is not constrained by a human building even though we may believe that this is where we would find God.

Last week, I was in Seattle for the first of four sessions of the Leadership in The New Parish course that I am taking. We learned about the theology of the New Parish and experienced communities working to live out being with the Parish. Parish is the neighbourhood that the church building is in or the community you live in. Sometimes this ministry is offered through a church, sometimes it is a group of people in a neighbourhood. One of the topics was named as the Big Why, how the church focuses more on what we do than the why we exist. We were told about [Simon Sinek’s](https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action) Ted Talk about this. He explains that the most successful companies and movements have one thing in common. Deep at the centre of what they do they understand their why. They are driven by a cause, a purpose, a belief.

<https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action>

1:25-3:10

We are challenged that we are too focused on our what and how. Do we know the why behind what we do as church? He says, if you talk about what you believe, you will attract those who believe what you believe. How much do we do that? At the New Parish session, we were asked, if the church is not the ‘why’ then what is? Too often, we get the what and the why mixed up. We have become obsessed with asking church questions - we start with the wrong question - we are asking the church to be what it cannot be - its too small. The big why is God's dream. It is way bigger than the church. It is everything.

What if God's dream was what drives us? What is God’s Dream? That is our why. What is God’s dream for this community? I do not just mean Eastside or the Living Spirit Centre but also the community we are centred in – Arcola East. God, in the Holy Spirit is active in our community and the world and the challenge is to trust that. The work is bigger than ourselves and we cannot do it alone. So we trust God is at work in us and others. This is our experience with Skylight Festival. Our team experiences that what we are involved with is bigger than ourselves, it really feels like a movement, even in the midst of the challenges we face.

We were told with regard to the church, that we need the parish as the organizing principal. When you think of our parish of Arcola East and you think about what Gods dream might be -who and what do you think about?

Particularity is about individuals in need and how that can be addressed as, by and with community. The challenge of Christianity for our time, we were told, is how do we join with what is happening in our communities and other faith communities that aligns with God's Dream? Focusing on how do we fix the church is the wrong question. A lot of the anxiety, fear, and handwringing in the church is a result of keeping the church at the centre. What if we put the neighbourhood, the parish at the centre? Flipping it creates a whole new openness. I invite you to explore that openness with me as I move through this course. There will opportunities to do some things together. For example I need two or three people who are interested in this vision to map the neighbourhood with me. I will guide you through what that means, but here is what I created when we were asked and guided by the course faculty. I invite us to be open to where you see the Spirit moving in your neighbourhood. Think about what is God’s Dream for us here and in the Parish. May we embrace this vision to be church in a new way, recognizing that God does not dwell in the church but is everywhere and active in our lives and in our communities.