



May 26, 2024

MNO Synod Convention

JOHN 3:1-7

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Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Christ our Saviour.

Well, this has been a long weekend. The MNO Synod has been meeting in Convention this weekend under the theme, “Renewed & Transformed”. Like all Synod Conventions, we have spent time together at meals, in worship, and in conversation. We have waded through budgets and bylaws, but we also set apart leaders and talked about where God is leading the church. We’ve talked about realities and challenges, but also hopes and dreams. We have prayed together and debated together.

Today marks the end of our convention. In our time together we made decisions about the business in front of us, but we also spent time yesterday in conversation. The most important piece of that was a block of time in which we talked about questions of value and purpose – about *what* it means to be Renewed & Transformed, but also *why* we need to be Renewed & Transformed.

I know many people I work with on a regular basis are already tired of hearing me ask the question “*why*.” If you don’t work regularly with me... well, I ask that question a lot. Actually, I ask a lot of questions in general.

I ask questions in my sermons. I ask questions of my staff. I ask questions at congregational meetings, at Synod Council, in conferences, and in small groups. The reason that I ask so many questions is that I think that questions are important. Beyond just exchanging information, questions lead to exploring and wondering. Questions open up possibility and potential. I like that they lead us to really think about something, to consider other views, and be curious about what could change, instead of just accepting the first easy answer that comes along.

It's kind of how young kids operate. If you've been around young kids, then you know that you can't answer questions fast enough: "Why is the sky blue?" "Why is the grass green?" "Why do I have to pick up my toys?" "Why are those people walking over there?" "Why are there mosquitos?" "How does the remote control work?" "Do you think a T-Rex could run faster than a velociraptor" "How many stars are in the sky?" "How come ice floats in water?" "What does this word mean?" "What does that sign mean?". It seems like there is never an end to the questions.

But, the question I hear most from kids is, "why?"

And "Why" is my favourite question.

Why invites us to explore purpose and meaning. It compels us to explore the reason something matters to us or how it helps us reach a goal. "Why" gives a second to pause and remind ourselves of the reasons we do the things we do.

During our keynote yesterday, we started with questions to get a sense of our current reality. One thing I noticed was that none of the questions we started with were "why" questions. Those questions were all about "what" we do. What are the things that define us; what are the things we wish we could change; and what should we try in order to fix our problems.

"What" questions assume that there are specific (and easy) answers to fix our problems, and if we just change a few of our actions then everything will turn out. "What" questions are all about the mechanics. They describe specific actions or plans. They don't tell us anything about the meaning or value behind them.

Only "why" helps us to go deeper into the meaning and reasons behind what we do.

In the gospel lesson for today, Jesus is speaking with Nicodemus – a Pharisee; a leader; a person who speaks on behalf of others. Nicodemus was a person who knew

the Torah backwards and forwards, understood all the rules and practices of Temple life and devotion to God through the Jewish faith. He could sense that there was something different about Jesus, and he was compelled to find out more. So, under the cover of dark so that no one would see him listening to the teaching of Jesus, he came to find out more.

But he asked the wrong questions. He didn't ask "why".

To Jesus' explanations about the Spirit, Nicodemus could only focus on "what". Instead of seeing how God was already at work Renewing & Transforming him, Nicodemus chose to focus on the physical process of birth. When Jesus talks about the freeing and unpredictable nature of the Spirit, Nicodemus can't connect the dots or make sense of it.

He missed the "why".

And, to Jesus, the "why" was all about how God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together, interacts with, loves, cares for, and redeems the world. This is God's purpose and is the thing that Jesus points to over and over again in John's Gospel.

Word and Spirit were with God in creation and throughout the ministry of Jesus. The Spirit empowers and builds up the church by reminding us what Jesus said and did, but it also leads us out and equips us each for ministry.

This is what lays at the heart of Holy Trinity Sunday. In an almost impossible-to-explain belief about how God lives, moves, and acts in our world as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are reminded that we experience God in different ways. Sometimes as creator, sometimes as comforter. Sometimes as healer, sometimes as agitator. Sometimes as teacher, and other times as servant. But always to help us see how God interacts with, loves, cares for, and redeems the world.

So why does that matter?

Well, I think it matters for a couple of reasons. First, it solidifies for us why we exist as the church. We exist to bear witness to what God is doing, to tell others what we have seen, and to encourage all people to grow in their faith. We exist to be a loving and faithful community of believers who put our trust in God, knowing that in baptism we have been named, claimed, empowered, and commissioned to be the Body of Christ in the world.

This means that as we figure out “what” we do, we already know “why” we need to do it. We can look at our beliefs, practices, and challenges through the lens of our reason for being and how they help us live into that purpose. As individuals, congregations, synods, and the National Church, we are called to live out that purpose together.

And that is a second thing that matters about the Holy Trinity: The Trinity is about community.

The Trinity shows what relationship and community can be when it’s all about God. There is no fighting over who gets to do what. Like we heard last week on Pentecost, the Spirit is deeply tied into what God has done and continues to do in the world. The Spirit was active through the ministry and teaching of Jesus. And all three continue to be active for this world, and for God’s created people.

In John’s Gospel, we hear about a God who loves us and works to give us life whether or not we understand how or when that happens. Despite our attempts to figure out every last detail and predict how God is going to act, John’s gospel reminds us that God will do what God will do. God will come to us. Sometimes through Christ, sometimes through the Spirit, sometimes as the one who births us into this world. But every time we encounter God, we know that it is because God chooses to interact with, love, care for, and redeem the world.

I hope that we will be able to see when God is doing that. I hope that we will experience both the windy disruption and calming breath of the Spirit in our lives and in our ministry together. And, I trust that the Spirit will continue to Renew & Transform us when we go back to our homes, congregations, and communities. After all, Jesus says that we can’t tell *where* and *how* the Spirit will move, or *what* it may look like when it does. But there is no doubt about the *why*. There is no doubt that it is how God will continue to bless us and lead us.