

The story from Luke's Gospel tells us that Jesus sent 70 of the disciples out into the community. That is why there is a picture of a lighthouse on the screen as an illustration of the theme for today's sermon.

I hope that, by the end of this, there will be an obvious connection between our mission as Christians, and a photograph of a lighthouse.

Just to satisfy your curiosity, I captured this photograph of a lighthouse in Woody Point, Newfoundland. The mountain in the background, on the other side of Bonne Bay, is Gros Morne.

How are lighthouses like our Christian mission? In the words of American author and mystic, **Ann Lamott**:

Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining.¹

One of the reasons why lighthouses are effective is that the light from their source of energy is focused. They don't try to do everything. The mission of a lighthouse is to send out a message into the area around it, and that's how I think that lighthouses have a mission that is similar to the Christian mission. Notice that I said Christian mission, NOT the mission of the church.

God's world is hurting and in need of many different kinds of healing. We could list everything from social justice issues to the environmental crisis that is causing the world as we know it to become more like a shipwreck than a source of abundant life for all of God's children. Too often the church has attempted to provide all kinds of healing, rather than focus its energy on using the gifts that it has, and letting others deal with the rest. We cannot be all things to all people. Like lighthouses, we need to focus our mission on using the gifts that we have been given by our Creator.

One of the great preachers in the United Church of Canada, Salem Bland, is recorded as having said that;

"The point of life is to sail the ocean, not to draw it off into a little pond."²

The function of a lighthouse, and of Christianity, is to go out into the community, maybe in groups of two as Jesus sent his disciples, and to preach the GOOD NEWS of God's presence and God's never-failing love. As Christians, we are examples of the Kingdom of God being present in God's world. We are preaching Christianity through how we live our lives as Christians. We do preach the GOOD NEWS by using our gifts every day. We are the GOSPEL – and people notice. In that way we are like the energy sent out by a lighthouse.

¹ Anne Lamont; Bird by Bird: Some instructions on writing and life, page 236

² Salem Bland, quoted by Richard Allen, Touchstone, January 2010, page 47

We know that Jesus said that when we live the values of the Kingdom of God, it is present among us. The disciples that Jesus sent out into the community lived those values and were amazed at the power of their ministry. Did Jesus send 5,000 well-fed people out to be disciples? One of the fantasies of western culture is that bigger is better. After the collapse of several capitalist organizations that were “too big to fail”, we know the truth about this fantasy and our eyes are on the effectiveness of the disciples of Jesus who calmly went out into the community, and came back with stories of lives transformed.

The people of Newtonbrook and Northminster do that here in Willowdale. As members of Don Valley Refugee Resettlers, our congregations have transformed the lives of many refugees through the use of our God-given gifts – gifts that we often take for granted. This is a gift called hospitality.

Here at Newtonbrook, a group has just completed a study of Diana Butler Bass’ book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. Butler-Bass studied THRIVING, mainline congregations in the U.S.A. and discovered certain Christian practices that helped them to thrive. Extending hospitality was one of those Christian practices. She writes that: “True Christian hospitality is not a recruitment strategy designed to manipulate strangers into church membership. Rather, it is a central practice of the Christian faith – something Christians are called to do for the sake of the thing itself.”³

DVRR is like that – a devoted team who extend hospitality to refugees – and those requiring sanctuary – just because it is the Christian thing to do. When we do that, Butler-Bass has found, our congregations begin to thrive. It is, I believe, because the energy of the lighthouse goes out into a hurting world and saves lives.

Conclusion:

In my travels, I have come across an inspiring story of life / death / and resurrection. This story was told by my predecessor in a small congregation and I believe that it has a relationship to our ministry as Christians, who are like lighthouses. Remember, lighthouses have a mission to save lives.

Once upon a time, on a rocky, windy seacoast, the local people despaired at how many lives were being lost because of ships that sank along that stretch of coastline.

One day the community gathered together and decided that this could go on no longer. Too many lives were being lost. They decided to form a life-saving society.

There were few assets at the beginning – but lots of energy. The group set up a shack to keep their equipment in and every time that a ship foundered on the rocks offshore, they were there in small boats, with life rafts; life preservers, and whatever else they could use to bring new life to people who might otherwise be lost at sea.

³ Diana Butler-Bass, *Christianity For The Rest of Us*, page 81

Over time, their small hut became a clubhouse to make things more comfortable for members of the life saving society. They used better boats. They set up more elaborate equipment, and hired staff.

As time progressed the clubhouse was renovated, and renovated again so that it became like a fine place to eat; to watch the storms, and to gather on a social basis. The life-saving society rented the clubhouse to non-members for weddings and receptions because of the view of the ocean, and this became a good source of income for them. The energy among the membership for life-saving dwindled. Few remembered the wisdom from the Book of Proverbs:

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”⁴

As time progressed, more and more of the budget was dedicated to keeping up the grounds, and a smaller proportion was dedicated to the purchase of life-saving equipment and paying for the staff. In fact, the budget began to indicate a need for staff reductions in that part of the society’s activities. It was said that they could no longer afford to pay people to hang around waiting for a ship to sink. Couldn’t these people cut the grass, or serve in the bar? They began to ask themselves questions about how they might keep the life-saving society going.

Staff reductions and budget cuts happened. It was as if the light in the lighthouse had lost its source of energy.

Meanwhile, others in the community had noticed that there were shipwrecks happening off their coast and lives were being lost. What could they do about this human tragedy? It was the most common topic in the local coffee shop – something like climate change is today.

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Hymn # 420 – Go to the World

⁴ Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)