

## A Congregation Is a School for Love

“A Congregation Is a School for Love” is the theme of my sermon today, on a normal Sunday morning at Peace Church, when we have just baptised two children whose mothers came to this country as refugees, and who have received substantial support from the church, especially in their early days in Munich.

“A Congregation Is a School for Love” ...I came across this sentence in Robert Schnase’s book “Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations”. Some of you know how much this book has inspired me over the last 12 months. Some of you have read it; some of you have read my summary of it; some of you have heard our sermons on it. Last autumn, the Council on Ministries felt we should take Schnase’s book and its many fascinating themes and thoughts to accompany us through this year. So by now, I can’t help knowing some of it off by heart – and often thinking of it.

Like, ... at our anniversary weekend three weeks ago, many of you shared your stories of how you had come to Peace Church, and what the initial welcome had meant to you, and how you felt valued and appreciated right from the beginning. I was pleased, of course, but I just smiled to myself and remembered Robert Schnase saying: “Never underestimate the power of an invitation to change a person’s life.” I recall Dickson standing there on Pentecost Friday talking about himself as a bread-and-butter Methodist from Ghana, and how finding Peace Church has filled him with peace. We sang his favourite song, “When peace like a river attendeth my way....” I remember Peter standing in front of us that night and telling us that his membership of Peace Church has made all the difference to him. I remember David saying what an angel I had been for him when I went to the asylum seekers’ home and simply invited him to come to church and practise the piano as often as he liked...

***“Never underestimate the power of an invitation to change a person’s life!”***

But back to my first sentence, which is taken from the first chapter of the book. Robert Schnase is writing about radical hospitality and says: “A Congregation Is a School for Love”. Let me share with you the context in which he makes this declaration.

Schnase is considering why we (the church people) should invite and welcome people into our midst.

***“Why do we invite and welcome people in our midst? So that our statistics look better to impress the Bishop? In order to survive as an institution or to develop a stronger financial base? No! We invite people and make them feel welcome and at home, because we want to draw them into relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We want them to experience how this changes lives.***

***To live in community with others is part of God’s plan and intention for us. A congregation is a school for love, the place where God’s Spirit forms us and the place where we learn how to give love to and how to receive love from friends, neighbours and strangers.***

I love the fact that Schnase says that it is God's plan for us to live in community; that it is in community that the Holy Spirit forms us; that it is in community that we learn and, last but not least, it is in community that we learn how to give love and how to receive love.

Robert Schnase continues by saying:

***“The church is the presence of Christ in the world, the means by which God knits us into community in order to transform our lives and the lives of those around us.”***

Here is the reason why we should go to the school for love and, once we are there, keep the doors open for others. It is us, the church people, who can represent Christ in this world. It is us, the church people, whom God wants to be together. It is us, the church people, whom God wants to transform through one another. Just look around you right now... I bet you can see the faces of many people who have helped to transform you and your life and your family's life. I bet you can see many who have been transformed because you entered their lives.

Robert Schnase says that we do not welcome people because it is a nice thing to do, or because it may be fun. No. Sometimes it is actually a difficult and uncomfortable thing, to be nice, open, and friendly – especially to total strangers who we don't immediately take to. Don't you agree?

So, why should we be welcoming?

Schnase's answer is:

***“The greatest contribution we can make to the Body of Christ is inviting someone else or helping a newcomer feel genuinely welcome so that he or she receives what we have received.”***

Once we are truly and deeply touched by a warm welcome and by sincere openness, we just cannot hold back from giving the same to others. Once you have received a welcome, a home and a shelter from your brothers and sisters, you cannot imagine your own life - or their lives - without those things.

That is one of the experiences the apostle Paul has on his journeys. And so when his brothers and sisters go on their journeys, he makes sure that they will find a welcome. That's what we have just read about in the letter to the Romans where Paul commends Phoebe, an early church leader, to people's love and care.

Welcome her, he writes, help her, because she is worth it...

And of course, as God's creation, we are all worth it. We are all valuable and unique in God's eyes: of course we should show one another love and care.

What Paul is doing here is building relationships between people - networking - greeting first one, then another, in order to introduce them to each other. Some of them have met; some only know each other through the common mission they have, which is building up the early church. Some have only heard of each other in letters or from other people's stories ...

It is a bit like the people who are connected to each other through Peace Church...And all of them - all of us - are an important part of God's work in this world.

I would like to ask you all to pause – and take a moment to reflect.

Can you remember a time in your life when you went to a new place and didn't know the people – but somebody or something recommended you to them? ... or when you found you had something in common with those strangers and related to them straightaway?

Some of my memories of such times have been the start of real and lifelong friendships. And I am sure that is true for you, too.

Let me share with you some sentences from an article I found in the New York Times 6 weeks ago. It's by journalist Tara Parker-Pope.

The article is called "What are friends truly for?"

***"Researchers are only now starting to pay attention to the importance of friendship and social networks in overall health. People with a large circle of friends are healthier than those with fewer friends. ...***

***Friendship has a bigger impact on our psychological well-being than family relationships. ... People with stronger friendship networks feel like there is someone they can turn to. ... Friendship is an undervalued resource. -***

***The consistent message is that friends make your life better,"*** is the last sentence of the article. Reading this made me – of course – think of our own life stories, the many ex-pats and strangers we all know - especially the many refugees and migrants who have left their home countries not really from choice but because of poverty, violence, war and so on.

Think of the effects on people's health. What does being uprooted and alone do to them? What does it do to us?

And what can we do against those ill effects? For ourselves and for others?

When it comes to friends - real friends - I feel so privileged to be able to live in a church and have church friends. My very best friends in life are church friends. Friends made in or through church. And in every case, it all started with a welcome and an invitation.

***"Never underestimate the power of an invitation to change a person's life!"***

Offering welcome is a great thing. Especially when we do it to a total stranger, not knowing what will grow from it...

The thing about making friendships and networking in church is not so much about 'clicking' instantly and immediately being complete soul sisters or soul brothers. That of course can happen and it is one of the most wonderful things we can experience in life. But it is something that we will not find with each and every one that we meet. ... with everyone who sits and worships alongside us. All the same, we are asked to offer a certain level of openness – a readiness to relate. And if we know that this is what God wants us to do, that this is our contribution to the body of Christ, and that this is what keeps people healthy, why on earth wouldn't we try it? Why on earth wouldn't we make the effort? And make it over and over again? If we try to do that as individuals, we could soon be exhausted – but if we try to do it as a community – we will manage?

Let me share with you another moving, almost heart-breaking story.

It is from the book Chris Czyszczewski's mother wrote. It is the true story of a 1950's immigrant family.

Near the end of World War II, they were living in a rural village in Romania. Since they had no access to newspapers or the radio, they had no information whatsoever about what was going on in the rest of Europe. They had no idea of political developments or the progress of the war. There were rumours now and then – but that was it. Barbara Ohler Weber was just 20 years old, when all of a sudden her life changed for ever. As the Russians brought the war nearer and nearer to her village, she had to leave. Her husband had been forced to join up and was away with the Germany army. She had no word from him. She got separated from her family. So, with her six month old daughter in her arms, Barbara fled.

At every turn, she just kept on trying to keep ahead of the advancing Russian army. This was the beginning of a frightening & exhausting odyssey that lasted beyond the end of the war and carried her into the turmoil & horror of life as a refugee. This was the end of one life; the end of her home in Tschippendorf, Romania. Barbara's husband did survive, thank God, and the family was reunited. But they were still refugees. These amazing people were homeless for years – but they created a home within their hearts. They did not give up praying and hoping – and wherever possible, they did this with other people - in community. They went on to have two more children. Their youngest is actually our friend Chris!

It was in May 1952 that Barbara and Mike managed to emigrate to the US with baby Chris and their two older girls. They went as so-called 'displaced persons', that is, people without a home.

*"We were so overwhelmed with the welcome that I hardly noticed what was going on. I found myself in a car with baby Christine, with no idea what happened to the rest of my family. The couple in the car talked to me, but of course I couldn't understand the language...Even the car was strange. I had never been in a car before... Where were they taking me? Would I be taken away to work in a different area than Mike? Would my children be taken away to live with other families? The welcome had been so special, and now I was so scared...*

*When the car finally stopped, I could see Mike and the girls were there. I could see that they were standing in front of a house. ... As I was shown the house that we were to live in, I was really amazed. This house looked so wonderful. It was like a fairy tale setting. ... We had three rooms all to ourselves. One room served as the kitchen, living room and dining room. Two gas stoves were in this room. One stove for cooking and one for heating. A big couch was along one wall, and a large table stood in the middle of the room. There was a sink with hot and cold running water, and real cupboards were full of food, dishes, pots and pans. Everything was more than I had ever seen ... The bedroom had two full sized beds, a chest of drawers and a crib for the baby. Sheets, blankets, towels, pillows, everything was there. The closet even had clothing for the children. ...*

*Never before had I possessed so many things for the kitchen. Just looking at all the things that were in that little house made us feel so good...and yet we couldn't say thank you properly. Whatever we said, they couldn't understand, and we couldn't understand them either. Being unable to communicate seemed one of the hardest things we faced. We thanked God and asked him to bless all the people who helped*

*us and were so kind to us. We would have to wait a while to be able to tell them ourselves.*

*Some time later Mike started his job...*

*The children and I stayed in the house all the time. We were still in a daze from all that had happened in the last few days. I looked around in the kitchen to get acquainted with it. Some of the utensils were unfamiliar to me. Some of the food was in packages but I couldn't read the labels and didn't know what to do with them...*

*During the next week, more of the church people came and brought us things that were very useful. Our clothes were in very bad shape. Those good people, bless their hearts, bought a dress for me and dress pants and a shirt for Mike. The following Sunday, we went to the church with proper Sunday clothes. ... Everyone smiled at us and said something. We couldn't understand what was said during the service... but I liked the music. and some of it sounded much like the hymns we sang in Romania.*

*My nephew, who spoke some English, told us that we were asked to come back to the church in the evening. We didn't understand why, but we went. We were told to go downstairs into the large room in the basement. There were lots of chairs arranged in a circle, with a large table in the middle of the room. The table was full of packages. Next to the table were two chairs, one for Mike and one for me. We were told to open the packages. Even this was a new experience for us. We were not used to getting presents. And packages were never wrapped with colourful paper. Inside the packages were household things, clothes for us and the girls, some food, fruits and vegetables from the gardens, and a radio! ... We had only been in America for one week, and we already had a radio..."*

I always remember this part of Chris's life story whenever we welcome a baby at Peace Church – or even when I just think of offering a baby welcoming...

Throughout the history of humankind, throughout the stories of the Bible – both Old and New Testaments – being separated from home has always been an issue for so many people.

Being separated from home was and is as big an issue as coping with separation or making a new home in a strange place. There have always been Abrahams and Sarahs, Ruths and Naomis, Hagars, Pauls and Peters on the move for one reason or another. There have always been Jesus figures who meet us in the hungry & the thirsty, in the stranger & the naked, in the sick & in the captives – the least important, the poorest of the poor, that need others to do something for them. And of course we can add to this list all those who are worn out, sad, depressed & powerless; all those who feel – for whatever reason – alienated or overwhelmed or simply that they don't belong...

So : bearing all that in mind, and still remembering the story of that American congregation which welcomed Chris's family with those gifts of basic necessities – and more - let us come back to our theme: a congregation is a school for love. How can we love? How can we love each other as Christians, no matter how different we are?

***“As a school for love,” Robert Schnase writes, “the church becomes a congregation where people learn from one another how to love. People need to know that life is not having something to live on, but something to live for, that life comes not from taking for oneself, but by giving of oneself. ... God intends for people to live their lives interlaced by the grace of God with others, to know the gift and task of community...”***

God is giving us to each other: as a gift and as a task. That is so true, isn't it? And we can help each other to live purposeful, better - even healthier - lives, if we will open up to one another, and let other people in, always keeping in mind that our invitation is really the invitation of Christ!

Let me finish with one last sentence from Robert Schnase:

***“Radical hospitality begins with a single heart, a growing openness, a prayerful desire for the highest good of a stranger. It begins when one person treats another respectfully and loves the stranger enough to overcome the internal hesitations to invite the new person into the life of Christ’s church.”***

So, why wait? Why hold back? Why hesitate?

Let's just do it: open doors, hands, hearts, never underestimating the power of an invitation to change a person's life.

Amen.