

Isaiah 43:1-7 and Acts 8: 14-17

Delivered January 7, 2010

A few months ago, I heard about a family in distress in our community—not the church community—but the wider Covesville Community. I knew that the family didn't belong to a church and I thought the family might need some help—in the way of prayers, or food, or something. Anyway, that's why I initially phoned—to offer help. I spoke with the woman of the household for a while, about her family troubles. At the end of our conversation as I said my goodbyes, she offered this: "I'm **sooo** lonely." She caught me off guard, for sure. My response was, "Gee, I'm sorry about that, but I can see why you're lonely. I promise I'll call again. I enjoyed talking with you." After I got off the phone, I got to thinking more about her admission. I certainly hadn't handled that part of the conversation very well. I even wondered if she had been fishing for an invitation to come to our wonderful little church. Who better than the pastor, after all, to offer that invitation?

A week later I phoned again. The woman answered. We chatted, and after a while, she again said to me, "I'm sooo lonely." I was ready this time, I tell you what. "Well then," I responded, "Why don't you come to Cove this Sunday?" There was quiet on the other end of the line. Ah, she was considering my invitation. But no. The pause was followed by the dial tone. She had hung up on me!. She didn't even do the conventionally polite thing of saying "No thank you." I want you to know, though, that I'm not taking this personally —well not too personally. I don't believe she was hanging up on **me**. She was hanging up on the church. And by that I don't mean she was hanging up on **you**, either. She was hanging up on institutional religion

By that, I mean, she was hanging up on her perceived understanding of life in the church--doctrines and dogmas, priests who abuse children and pastors who steal money from the offering plate; She was hanging up on church institutions that launch grandiose building campaigns because they are more focused on growing themselves and their bank accounts than doing God's work in the community. Finally, she was hanging up on committees and all the volunteer responsibilities that go hand and hand with belonging to a church. No, that woman wasn't hanging up on me or on you, she was hanging up on the institutionalized church.

And she's not alone. There are plenty of folks who are running scared from institutional religions. The mainline denominations are losing members. People are either staying at home, or they are involved in Eastern religions, or they are worshiping at mega-churches, which are institutions yes, but at least they are institutions that don't carry the baggage of the past. As far as the life span of the church is concerned, which started after Jesus' death, and which we read about in Acts, this wariness of church institutions is a relatively modern phenomena. There was a time, when institutions, including religious institutions, were considered a good thing, actually.

For instance, beginning right after WWII, I don't know, maybe because returning veterans needed something to do in our then mostly Protestant country, churches

began building at a frenetic pace. Every church had a building campaign going. And, it wasn't enough to have a church service on Sunday and a Bible study on Wednesday, either. Churches had their men's groups and their women's groups, their book study groups, their knitting groups. Churches got together and formed intra-church groups, too--like the Virginia Council of Churches and the World Council of churches, both established after WWII. But now, as I said, that has changed.

Partially in response to the woman who hung up on me, I want to explore this thing, called religious institution. I want to do that, first of all, by looking at our OT text for today.

The Isaiah text was written sometime after 587. What happened in 587 BC? That's the year Babylonia attacked Jerusalem, burned the temple to the ground, and carried off Jerusalem's most prominent citizens into exile. We're talking politicians and government officials, military personnel like generals—and financial wheeler dealers—large landowners, and such. The Babylonians took these folks with them back to Babylonia, because they knew that without them, the Jewish institutions in Israel would implode, which they did. Without the generals, the army couldn't function; without the priests, there was no one to lead services and keep the traditions of the faith alive; without the politicians and government officials, there was no one to organize rebuilding crews, reestablish schools, and form a police force that could keep looters and robbers at bay. All this to say, institutions had their necessary place in Jewish society and religion.

Just so you know, the exiles eventually returned to Israel in 539 BC—just like Isaiah prophesied they would--and to a degree, those exiles were able to reestablish their precious institutions—but that's beyond the scope of what I want us to talk about today. The point I am trying to make is that institutions are important.

Now I want to do a 180 on you. I want to turn to our second text for today. The one in Acts. It's about Philip. There are several Philips mentioned in the Bible. Some are kings—or princes. There is, for instance, King Philip who was the father of Alexander the Great. According to the author of the book of John, Philip was one of the twelve disciples. The Philip we read about today, though, was not one of the twelve. After Jesus' death, the disciples, aka apostles, established themselves in Jerusalem. They were so very busy running the Church Institution, or as one author has it, doing the “scut work” of the church, that they eventually had to elect seven elders to look after poor people and evangelize. Philip was one of these chosen seven.

Philip gets a fair amount of press in the Book of Acts. He's the elder, for instance, who baptizes the Ethiopian Eunuch. In our text for today, we read that he is the elder who brings Christianity to the Samaritans. The thing I want to emphasize about Philip is that he has spirit. By that I mean that he is exuberant in his faith. He has a certain, *je ne sais quoi*, let us say, God given charisma and enthusiasm. People listen to Philip. He stirs them up. Gets them excited. People want to follow him. That's all fine and dandy. However, if you read between the lines, you can tell that the keepers of the budding institution, also known as the scut bucket pushers, the apostles in Jerusalem, aren't

overjoyed by his activity. He's not sticking with the program—which is to proselytize among **the Jews**. Can't you see it now? Peter and John are in their church office in Jerusalem—their file cabinets overflowing with scrolls, people lined up outside their office door waiting to be blessed, when their church secretary runs in and tells them that Philip is doing it again—he's gone off to baptize the SAMARITANS. (There's probably a roll of the eyes here, when the secretary says the word, SAMARITAN) Yes, Philip the loose cannon—or I guess, better, Philip, the loose bow and arrow, is doing God-knows-what among those reviled folks in Samaria. Something has to be done! So Peter and John hitch the next caravan to Samaria and check in on Philip.

Of course, Peter and John are blown away at what they witness. According to scripture, “the crowds were of one accord listening eagerly to what Philip said..unclean spirits cried out with loud shrieks, and came out of many who were paralyzed or lame. There was great joy in the city.” Peter and John had been ready to give Philip what for, but all they can muster is, “Well, when you baptized these folks, you should have baptized them in the name of the father, the son **AND** the Holy Spirit.” So, Peter and John, really just in order to save face, lay hands on the Samaritans which they didn't need to do, because the Samaritans were **ALREADY** filled with the Holy Spirit. Politically correct Philip doesn't say a thing. He's wise enough to realize that Peter and John's work—the creating and maintaining of the church institution, is necessary too, to the survival of Christianity.

What I am getting at here, which is pretty obvious really—is that institutions matter--(remember what happened when Israel lost theirs). Spirit and institution—that's an odd pairing for sure, but it's a necessary pairing. The first century church prospered NOT because of institutions but not despite institutions either.

Author and pastor Louis Weeks says this in regard to institutions: “Congregations often dismiss the very work that keeps them vital. Good organization is a requisite for effective mission and evangelism.. ...Indeed, “Everything we do administratively says something about who we are as a community. Scut work is ministry.”

The trick, then, in this place which is high on spirit, certainly, is to make our scut work, we're talking writing checks, holding meetings, working from a calendar, and cleaning up after Fellowship Dinner or Communion, **spirit -filled** scut work. We do that, and believe you me, even the most lonely of hearts out there will be beating down our doors to be here among us.

Let all the people say, Amen