

The Church: a hospital for hurting souls

Message for Sunday, January 19, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 1:39-55

1) Help!

Imagine you are up against a wall and you need help...

- You are a girl in school, 15 years old, and you have just found out you're pregnant. Or, you're the boyfriend.
- Your wife is an alcoholic.
- Your husband walked out, after 12 years of marriage.
- You just got fired from your job.
- Your husband has been sexually abusing your two children, perhaps yourself as well.
- You just got out of jail.
- You beat your children, and you're ashamed and scared.
- You can't cope with your drug habit any more.

You need help. Where will you go to get help? Whom will you seek out? Would you think of going to one of your brothers or sisters in the Church? Or is that the last place you would go?

You can sum up my message today in one sentence: The Church should be a place of refuge, a shelter from the storm, a place where people know they can go to get help.

2) What happened when Mary was in trouble?

Let's see what the Bible has to tell us about how God's people were a support to others in their time of need. The story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, seeking refuge with Elizabeth during her pregnancy is an example. We sometimes read this story in the weeks before Christmas, but it often gets lost in the excitement of the season.

Just to refresh your memory, here's a brief summary of what happened:

- a) The angel tells Mary she is going to have a child. Perhaps as an example of God's power to do this, he tells her that her relative Elizabeth (a very old woman) is six months pregnant.
- b) Mary accepts the news. She hurries off to visit Elizabeth in another town.

- c) As soon as Mary arrives, Elizabeth feels her baby jump. She also is delighted to greet Mary, and calls her "blessed."
- d) Mary rejoices in these events with her own "song."
- e) Mary remains with Elizabeth about three months (perhaps until just after John the Baptist is born).

Why did Mary hurry to see Elizabeth?

- Because the angel had told her that her relative was having a baby in just a few months. Like any friend, she would want to share the joy.
- Perhaps there was some scandal over her pregnancy. Joseph was certainly shocked at her condition, and planned to cancel their wedding [Matthew 1:19]. He changed his plan when he learned that this was from God. But would the townspeople swallow that line? Not likely! So perhaps she fled to have some peace.

But Luke 1:56 says that Mary stayed with Elizabeth only three months, and then returned home. That's the very time she would be beginning to show, when she would have tried to escape the scrutiny of gossipy neighbours.

3) What could have happened? What happens with us?

Nevertheless, consider what may have happened if Elizabeth's greeting had been one of judgement and condemnation, instead of joy blessing. What if Elizabeth had met her with something like "Well, look who's been sleeping around town! Looks like you won the prize!"

How often do parents do the same thing to their children? Children have problems, and instead of encouraging them, helping them and supporting them, the parents belittle, accuse and judge them. After years of this, it is no wonder that the children don't want to talk to their parents! And if they have a problem, their parents will be the last to hear about it.

Here's an example. A girl — let's call her Susan — tells her Dad she doesn't know how to do her math homework. Dad looks at it and says, "Oh Susan, this is easy. Anyone can do this. What's the matter with you?" He didn't come right out and call her stupid; but the message was there just the same.

Dad could have said something like, "Show me how far you can do it, and where you get stuck." [That allows Susan to see that she does know something after all]. Then, "Here's how you do it. Now you try it." It may

take a few tries before she gets it right. Encourage her through it all.

Churches can do the same thing to hurting people. After suffering abuse for many years, a woman came to her pastor to share her secret, and ask for help. His reply was, “What did you do to make him get so mad?” In other words, “It’s your fault.” It took many more years before the woman gained enough courage to again tell someone else about her problem; you can be sure it wasn’t a pastor.

This story hurts not just because it is true, but even more because it is common. So often people come to someone in the church [I don’t mean this congregation; I mean churches in general] with a problem, and find that they are judged and criticized, instead of helped.

I’ve heard churches referred to as “the only place where you shoot your wounded.” But it doesn’t have to be that way. What would it be like if the church was the place where hurting people knew they could come for help?

4) A dream: for the Church to be a shelter, a place of refuge

I heard about a church where the treasurer had “borrowed” \$200,000 from the fund for the church’s new building, to finance some renovations at his business. He was sure the business would boom and he would soon be able to pay back all the money. Instead, it went bust.

He tearfully confessed his crime to the Board. Some wanted to throw him out of the church, and sue him for the money. In the end, they kept him as a member of the church (but no longer as treasurer). He had to make a public confession before the congregation, and make token restitution payments for the next two years, but it was nowhere near the amount missing. The Board members forgave the rest of the debt, and paid back the money out of their own pockets.

The Church is not a club for saints. It is a hospital for those who hurt. It specializes in broken hearts, shattered dreams, shipwrecked souls. It is a place of refuge, a shelter from the storm.

Theme for today: What if...? What if Mary had said, “Thank-you for asking, but I’d rather not be the mother of Jesus.” What if her family and Joseph had said, “How dare you! Get out and never come back!” What if the people whom Jesus invited to follow him had said, “Sorry, not interested.” What if people in the church today said...?

With every generation, the church must renew its commitment to follow Jesus. How will you respond? Whom will you invite to be part of the next generation?