

When Church Stops Working Book Study, Presbytery of Niagara
Chapter 2: “Busy People, Busy Church – A Killer Cocktail”

Summary

- Often, the importance of origin stories is in getting them right and then the rest of the story just flows.
- We tell the origin stories of our churches because they are victorious. Once we didn't exist, and then we did! We don't have origin stories from those who didn't make it.
- North Americans think that mega churches represent success because we believe that bigger is better.
- Acts 2:46-47 reads like a desirable origin story for the church. [Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.]
- We are led to believe that those with origin stories will triumph, that they will grow.
- Stories of decline don't fit with the story of the secular age that demands increasingly more.
- We don't want to admit the truth that the church started out scared and uncertain; threatened from the outside, and betrayed from the inside
- The secular age and its insistence on progress, more, and triumph, prevent us from seeing that in fact, the church started in a much different way.
- The “Acts of the Apostles” would be better named “The Acts of God.”
- The first thing that the disciples are told by the risen Jesus is to wait in Jerusalem. Then God acted and then the church responded.
- The secular age blinds us to God's action, and so all we are left with is *our own action*.
- The secular age also makes the possibility of God's action impossible to imagine.
- Perhaps our greatest fear is that if we choose to wait, God will not show up.
- God's people only ever act in response to God acting first.
- This makes it imperative that we see and hear God so that we can act in response.

- The story of George who has Down syndrome – busyness of work causes him to stop laughing.
- In North America, everyone plays by capitalism’s rules, like: time is money.
- Some people are too slow for the secular age – babies, the elderly, the sick.
- The secular age tells us that time is money, and money is value.
- If we want more value, we run into a snag: we can’t make more time. So we have to go faster.
- This acceleration also pushes the church.
- The thinking goes that the more programs the church offers, the more time people will spend with God.
- The competition of meaning making is intense among the various activities of life.
- Acceleration causes fatigue until there is no room left in our lives even if the activity could be valuable.
- Acceleration, the busyness we feel, is a symptom of our frustrated search for meaning.
- Going slow may help, but it won’t fix the problem.
- We need to wait. You can’t wait when you are busy.
- When we are not waiting in a ready stance, we can miss the important things. (analogy to having the stick on the ice in order to receive the puck)
- Busy people and churches face limits to how much they can speed up.
- Churches are no longer able to wait for God because they are too busy
- Bible story of Sarah, who laughed when God announced that she would have a child in her old age.
- Abraham and Sarah’s innovative solution led to serious problems. They didn’t wait for God to act.
- Sarah misdiagnosed the problem as barrenness, and so her solution doesn’t solve the real problem.
- We need to be less busy in order to encounter God.
- We need to focus on experiences of resonance.
- Any easy-to-follow solution about how to encounter God reduces God’s presence to a problem.
- When we try to talk about the experience of seeing God, language fails us.

Discussion:

Recount a story of when purposefully slowing down created an opportunity of having a beautiful encounter of some kind.

- Long, slow walks, stopping for prayer, encountering God in the people met on the way.
- Never having slowed down long enough to see God do something
- Conscious of being too busy, always thinking about the next thing to do
- Sunday morning in church is a great time to relax, slow down, feel the presence of God and the love of the community
- A sign that says, “Be patient and wait on the Lord”

3 Questions:

1. What are concrete examples of what the church does in its busyness? How has innovation made things worse?
 - Yard sales, bake sales, etc. as community outreach and fundraising
 - Lunch after church service draws people in
 - Increased workload being in-church and on-line; less sense of community online
 - Changes in technology result in errors due to insufficient training, creating extra work
 - Church programs, office work, cleaning, committee meetings – instead of asking how and what, ask why? Is this within God’s will for us?
 - Is the role of the minister to be a leader or to be a theologian-preacher? If you are trying to be everything to everyone, you’ll be nothing to anyone.
 - Waiting starts with listening for the voice of God. Otherwise, we just do something and hope that God will help us.
 - 20% of people doing 80% of work
 - Loneliness is one of the biggest needs today.

2. How do you understand waiting as described in this chapter (with the stick on the ice) when it comes to the church waiting for God to act?
 - Go to where the puck will be, not where it is now
 - It takes a team to win the game
 - Acts 1 describes the followers waiting together, consciously praying and looking for God
 - Praying without ceasing, offering everything to God
 - General discomfort with silence while waiting or even anytime
 - Turning to scripture, especially Psalms

- We all know that the church is in decline. We've been captured by the secular spirit of the age - a root cause of the decline. Waiting will involve reshaping our thinking. We need a new image of what the church could be and now is the time to work on that. If we wait a couple of more decades, we won't be able to.
 - When I was younger, I always had music or something in the background (crowding out God). Now, part of my waiting is just shutting off the peripheral stuff. Giving room for God to speak through ideas/thoughts/etc.
 - Waiting has to do with casting off distractions
 - Waiting involves learning about who God is from the Scriptures.
 - In a steady state of readiness while we wait
3. How long would *you* wait for God to act in our current situation of church decline? What might that waiting look like?
- As long as it takes
 - Being open to God's action, often in small things
 - Things aren't moving as fast as we want them to
 - Church as a place of peace and joy in a world of war – few find it
 - What exactly are we waiting for? Fuller churches? A totally different path?
 - “Fear not, little flock.”
 - Worrying is practical atheism – when we worry, we're not believing that God's got this.
 - Sara and Abraham - they waited like 80 years. Jumping and running without a direction is counterproductive.
 - Sara and Abraham got sick of waiting and tried to take things into their own hand. God didn't say, “The heck with you,” but God acted anyway. God overran their lack of waiting.
 - The temptation in the process is that you're always tempted to give up in frustration, and despair.
 - We will wait together
 - We'll develop a fellowship together - shared meals
 - It's hard to wait. But God is infinitely patient