

“Finding Willing Participants in Anything is a Challenge”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew's United Church
for the Second Sunday After Pentecost, June 18, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Father's Day

Scripture Readings: Psalm 116 (VU #836)

Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

The lists have been completed and submitted to the league offices of the NHL. In anticipation of the expansion draft to populate the new hockey team to play next season in Las Vegas, each current NHL team could protect 7 forwards, 3 defencemen, and one goalie, or, if they wished, protect 8 skaters and one goalie.

There was little talk about the whole process. The plan is more complicated than at first it seems, since players with little experience are protected from the draft. Toronto, for example, has a host of rookies who have been in the league for only one year, and they are not prone to be drafted. Tampa Bay Lightning traded one of their promising young players (who had some disagreement with the coach) to Montreal to get back a young player not subject to the draft and draft picks in return. Montreal feels they have strengthened their front lines; Tampa Bay is preparing for the future and not losing a player for nothing in return.

This is a part of the business of professional sports – managing players and determining who is the best asset to protect, and who can be traded. There is not much question these players want to play for any team in the NHL when they are drafted, although some with protected contracts have refused to free up their limitations in order to qualify for a trade or to be exposed for the draft. It is great to be in the NHL, but not so great for individuals and families when players face being bumped and moved.

Getting people involved in any venture is a challenge these days. If hockey players are hesitant to change their residence and habits, when even the lowest paid make many times more than the average worker in Sudbury, then it is no wonder that it is difficult to find volunteers or to discover people who will get involved in almost any activity today.

Studies have shown that fewer and fewer people see their role as a citizen and part of society means that they should be part of a community group, volunteer for a neighbourhood activity, or help with a not-for-profit fundraiser.

We have seen it in our own congregation, as major events such as the fall fair have been replaced by smaller ventures due to a limited number of volunteers.

Don't get me wrong – we are blessed by many people who give of their time generously, as seen by the recent indoor garage sale and clothing sale. We were touched by the large bank of volunteers and items donated in both events. But not all churches or community groups can draw from such a rich, eager pool of volunteers.

I can't help but wonder if Jesus faced a similar challenge in his quest to recruit disciples for his own cause within his community. It is always a challenge to get people to follow a leader, to support a cause, and to give of their time and energy for something not related to job or family.

But Jesus got young men involved, and others – men and women – came along inspired by what he had to say to become his followers.

Studies have shown that there are some basic steps one must take in the search for volunteers and people to be committed to a cause.

The data is not particularly surprising, nor is it all that unusual. It is the kind of insight that most of us could reach with a little bit of reflection and common sense, but as one person said to me this week: "Common sense is not all that common these days."

So if you have not determined what makes a compelling case to attract volunteers, or maybe you are not sure what efforts and groups and activities interest you to be a volunteer, then listen to this list. It may resonate with you.

- 1) People will volunteer and be active if the cause is something they see as important. Individuals are busy today, and so they have no time for extras – at least extras that do not captivate them and make them feel moved to do something that fits in with what they see as important. There was a time that simply doing something that was not work was an attraction, but now people are so focused on doing that which is seen as significant that they seek opportunities that are consistent with that outlook. Important work has replaced busy work.
- 2) People will be more eager to participate if the opportunity fits in with their values. The second is related to the first – what is important usually is something that underlines the values that we hold, and our sense of what is significant for our lives. Simply doing something for the sake of being busy does not attract any interest for most people. We look for that which underlines our values and what we deem to be important. For good or for ill, political involvement becomes much more passionate, as we have seen around the world in recent years, when a movement or individual offers a position or positions that align with our values. General attributes of seeking "stability" or "good government" do not resonate unless there are specific values that align with those positions.
- 3) People get involved when they see they can make a difference: The best recruitment happens when people see that what they do can make a difference. I have learned over my career that the way we recruit people is often doomed to fail: "Would you like to help with this event/project/program? It is really easy, takes no skill, and little of your time and energy. Anyone can do it, so hope you will help." No wonder the common response is: "If anyone can do it, get someone else."

Busy people are the best people to ask to do anything, primarily because they have a way of seeking to make a difference and share their skills in whatever ways they can – but just putting in time is not of interest to such people.

- 4) People want to be involved when they can connect with others.

Churches are places where people seek some connection with others. Now we have experimentation with cyber services and satellite congregations who watch a worship service broadcast from afar and witnessed in one's home or in a remote congregational setting, but even there one can experience an attempt to make connections with others.

In a world where activity may be isolated, and jobs are more and more in cubicles or off-sight work stations, the desire to connect with others is real and significant. Jesus called his disciples as a group, and often had them carrying out their ministry in pairs, underlying that need for a sense of cooperation and community.

- 5) Finally, people more often than not will say yes if you ask them to do something for which they have some expertise, but it is time limited. Churches are notorious for inviting someone into a position, or accepting a willing volunteer, and then there is no time limit on the task at hand.

Bud Thompson died this past week, and his life will be honoured in a service on Wednesday at Trinity United Church in North Bay. He was acknowledged at Manitou Conference earlier this month and made "Treasurer Emeritus," as he no longer could fulfill his responsibilities as treasurer of the Conference after almost 40 years of service.

It is an incredible record of service, but the more we acknowledge such service, sadly, the more we discourage others to get involved. "In light of 40 years, my 2 or 3 years would not be welcomed, so I will decline any invitation to get involved."

Not a healthy or helpful response.

Jesus' disciples spent about 3 years with him, and yet they helped to transform the world and make a great impact on all of us.

Was their service worth it? Did they make the right decision to get involved?

You be the judge – but I think the answer is: "Yes, they did."