

Sunday, October 16, 2016

## Synod Sunday and the Irresistible Revolution

Luke 18

### 1. What is Synod – the structures of the courts in the PCC

I am so glad to be here with you this morning. As previously mentioned, Pastor Herb is away at Synod. And the question that some of us may have is, “What is Synod?” For those of us who are familiar with the Presbyterian Church in Canada, this might be an easy question to answer.

For me personally, having grown up in the Presbyterian Church in Markham Ontario, Synod was something that was hardly EVER discussed and it wasn’t until I went to Knox College for seminary training, did I get a better understanding of what it was.

To be honest with you, it wasn’t until I attended my very first Synod in Parksville, British Columbia that I grasped what Synod was. It wasn’t until I experienced it myself, that I understand its significance in the life of the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

### **[SLIDE: SESSION]**

In the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the structure of the Church governance is based on something called the courts. The most familiar “court” that all local congregations like St. Giles know about is what is known as the “Session”.

**[SESSION: - The Ruling Elders, The Teaching Elder]**

The Session is made up of Elders. And within the elders, there is what is known as the “ruling” elders. The Session is made up of the Ruling Elders that have been elected by the congregation. As well, there is an Elder known as the “teaching elder”. The Teaching Elder is the minister or the pastor and in our case at St. Giles’ Presbyterian Church, that “Teaching Elder” is the Rev. Herb Hilder.

**[SLIDE: The Presbytery]**

The next court that is in place is what is known as the Presbytery. The Presbytery is made up of all the local congregations in the geographical area. The Presbytery that we are a part of is known as The Presbytery of Kamloops.

**[SLIDE: The Presbytery Churches]**

And our sister churches in the Presbytery includes Cariboo Presbyterian Church in Lac La Hache, Cariboo Presbyterian Church in Nazko BC, First Presbyterian Church in Prince Rupert, Kitimat Presbyterian Church, Knox Presbyterian Church in Vernon, St. Andrews in Kamloops (where the Rev. Steve Filyk will begin ministry very soon), St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Penticton, St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Salmon Arm, and St. David’s Presbyterian Church in Kelowna. Many Presbyteries meet once a month. But, as you can imagine because of the geographical nature of our presbytery, we only meet three times a year.

**[SLIDE: Synod]**

The next court that is in place, is Synod. And Synod is generally organized so that all the Presbyteries in the province meet together once a year to discuss and make

decisions that have come before it. In our case, St. Giles is part of the Presbytery of Kamloops and the Presbytery of Kamloops is part of the Synod of British Columbia.

Now, I know, when we hear about these kinds of “meetings” it can leave an impression that when the court meets it’s about business that does not concern us. That cannot be farther than the truth. This summer, when I received the package for Synod, I was talking to Pastor Herb and he pointed out to me that there was an info introduction included. In the information that was included, I was informed that theme of Synod is “Vision and Vision Keeping in Congregations”. And this particular Synod, Ken Shigematsu, the pastor of Tenth Avenue Alliance Church in Vancouver has been invited to be the guest speaker at Synod.

Now when I heard this, I was quite excited for two reasons. The first reason is because before Alli and I were married, the church that she attended was Tenth Avenue Alliance. Alli was quite involved and met many of her good friends at that particular church. As well, she helped lead a small group during her time there.

As well, both Alli and I have found memories of Pastor Ken. In particular, Alli tells a story about meeting Ken for the first time. What you have to understand is that there were roughly 500 people attending Tenth Avenue Church when Alli was there. And Alli met Ken at a meet and greet.

Alli went to church there and was part of a small group and it wasn't until a couple of years later when she had an opportunity to speak with Ken again face to face. And when Ken saw her, he immediately remembered who she was. Ken says to her, "Oh! Shouldn't you be finishing residency at the Cancer Agency right about now?" When I heard this story, I was quite impressed because Ken was able to remember Alli's name even without a name tag!

The second reason that I got excited was because I saw the theme of Synod and the topic that Ken will or has spoken about. And that topic is Vision and Vision Keeping in Congregations. I'm not sure what Ken has spoken about regarding this topic, but just from seeing the title, I'm sure the teaching materials that he will bring to Synod will help with each and every local congregation. And this is what I mean about Synod. Meeting together once a year may seem like it's not a lot, but as we can see, one of the hopes of Synod is to give fresh bread to our church leaders so that they can bring the things that they have learned back to the local congregation.

**[SLIDE: The General Assembly]**

The final court that is set in place is what is known as the General Assembly. Like Synod, it meets once a year in June. At that meeting, there are both ruling elders and teaching elders or pastors that are represented all over Canada. They meet in order to discuss issues that are important for the denomination. The decisions that are made in those meetings are important because they guide how we as the Presbyterian Church in Canada are to act going forward.

I bring up the courts of the Presbyterian Church for a couple of reasons. The first is to bring attention to the polity or in other words how we as a denomination is structured. It may feel like being in Prince George, that we are separated and alone in this northern city in British Columbia. But, that cannot be farther from the truth! We are connected to a greater body that is the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The second reason I bring up the courts and in particular Synod is to remind us of the work that is being done this weekend. This whole weekend, starting from this past Friday, October the 14<sup>th</sup> is Synod Weekend. And, Pastor Herb is the moderator of this 125<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Synod of British Columbia. This is important work that Pastor Herb is doing not only for the Presbyterian Churches in BC. What is being done at Synod directly affects us all here in Prince George as well. And so we must keep both the Synod of BC and Pastor Herb in our prayers.

The third reason why I bring up the courts is to ask the all important question that our teaching is based on in Luke chapter 18. What does Synod Sunday have to do with the irresistible revolution?

Let's turn our attention to Luke chapter 18.

## 2. Luke Chapter 18

The book of Luke is an important document in our scriptures and in particular to the gospels. And the reason why I say this is because it is the most detailed account of the life and ministry of Jesus that we have. In fact, in the first chapter of the book of Luke it begins with these words:

***1 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. Luke 1: 1-4***

When we read these words, we begin to understand why Luke has included so many seemingly side accounts of what happened when Jesus was teaching and preaching and healing in the scriptures. The other thing that we notice from these first four verses in the book of Luke is that we notice that Luke has a purpose for writing these things down. Luke is writing to someone named Theophilus.

Scholars believe that Theophilus was a Roman official that had come to know Christ as his Lord and Saviour. That's why Luke addresses him as "most excellent". And because he was a follower of Christ, those scholars believed that Theophilus probably had a lot of questions about Jesus and what it meant to be a part of the irresistible revolution. The book of Luke was written to Theophilus to give an account and assure him of who Jesus was and what he had taught during his ministry.

When we read Luke chapter 18 in it's entirety, we might think that Luke is randomly putting together events that do not go together. So, for example, when we look at our bibles, we see that Luke records

- 1. The parable of the Persistent Widow – Luke 18: 1-8**
- 2. The parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee – Luke 18: 9-14**
- 3. The Little Children and Jesus – Luke 18: 15-17**
- 4. The Rich Young Ruler and the Kingdom of God – Luke 18: 18-30**
- 5. Jesus Predicts his Death for the Third Time – Luke 18: 31 – 34**
- 6. A Blind Beggar Receives his Sight – Luke 18: 35 – 43**

Often times when I've read these scriptures in the past it feels like these passages are all disjointed, that the different sections that they appear in all make sense as individual accounts and "stories", but reading the chapter in it's larger context feels like driving a car with a manual transmission.

You're driving and changing gears very quickly, but you're missing each gear. It feels choppy. Where is Luke going with putting these six seemingly unrelated accounts? In Hong Kong, there's an old saying when you're driving a manual transmission car with a new learner. It's called "pow mah jai", or the literal translation is riding a pony. It's rough and bumpy when the driver stalls and starts the car. And in the same way when we read Luke, it sometimes feels that way as well.

But the point of Luke's writing isn't to just throw a bunch of random accounts together. Remember, he's writing to Theophilus, trying to reassure him of Jesus is. And I think it's important for us to understand where Luke is going with these passages as well.

### 3. The parable of the Persistent Widow – Luke 18: 1-8 – who is God?

The first parable that we will examine is the parable of the persistent widow. In this parable, we're told that Jesus, in his teachings, talks about a woman and a judge. We're told that the judge didn't care about God and didn't care about what people thought. We're also told that the woman persisted and she pestered that judge to give her justice against her adversary. After multiple times of being badgered by the woman, the judge who didn't care about God and who didn't care about people thought to himself, look, if the only thing it will take for me to get rid of this woman and have her stop pestering me is for me to give her justice, then I'll do it! And Jesus ends this teaching by saying:

***“Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup> And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” – Luke 18: 6-8***

In other words, even though this judge who did not care about God and for his neighbours, even if HE can grant justice, how much MORE will your Father in Heaven do the same for us? But the crux of the teaching comes in the final question

that Jesus poses. He says, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

This question about faith is related to the justice that the widow is seeking. The widow is seeking justification or in other words “vindication” from her enemy. In the case of the parable, the woman is going to a judge who is unjust. But in our case, OUR judge and OUR God is a JUST God.

And what is Jesus trying to teach about vindication? That God himself will be vindicated through sending Jesus Christ here on Earth. He is no longer to be seen as a God that is “up there” and disconnected with the world. INSTEAD, he has set foot here on Earth. He has walked with us and talked with us. He understands the things that we have gone through BECAUSE he himself has gone through those things as well. And ultimately all of this culminates on Christ dying on the cross for our sins.

This kind of teaching is MUCH more than just mere religion. It’s not about coming on Sundays and “doing our time”. It’s not about merely stamping our ticket to heaven. But instead, it is a call to become engaged in this world and become active in it, knowing that the world around us IS broken and longing to be healed.

4. The parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee – Luke 18: 9-14 – what does God look for?

The second parable that we find in Luke chapter 18 is the parable of the Tax Collector and the Pharisee. And in this particular parable, we get to see what worship in the synagogues in Jesus' time was like. In that parable we see that there is a time of prayer, and as we can see, it is one that is public. In that parable we are given a taste of two very different prayers.

The first prayer is offered up to God by a Pharisee, or in other words, a teacher of the law, someone who was considered religious and holy in those days. In that prayer, the Pharisee says this:

***“God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.<sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” – Luke 18: 11- 12***

At face value, that sounds pretty good. What the Pharisee is saying to God is that I've been keeping all of your commandants. I don't steal, I don't do evil things, I'm faithful, I don't rip anyone off, like this tax collector. I even fast twice a week AND I tithe a tenth of what I have. These “outward” actions are good. But what is the most repeated word in this prayer?

I thank you that I am not like these other people. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of what I have. The word “I” is repeated over and over again. And is this what

worship all about? What “I” have done? Of course not! Worshiping God is about God alone. HE is central to the worship that we bring to HIM.

But contrasting this prayer from the Pharisee is the Tax Collector. He is the one that is seen to have little faith. In his prayer, Jesus describes him like this:

***13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ – Luke 18:13***

And Jesus says this about the parable:

***14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” – Luke 18:14***

The tax collector, although seen as the one that has little faith, goes straight to the heart of God. Instead of exalting himself, trying to justify that he is a good person, the tax collector is self-aware. He knows that he is a sinner and that he has done wrong, and instead, of trying to justify himself in front of God, he has thrown himself in front of God, begging for mercy.

Here we see the connection that is being formed between the first parable about the persistent woman and the unjust judge and the parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The first parable is based in the courtroom and the second parable is based in a house of worship. But both parables are connected through this idea of being justified. The woman in the first parable received justice and was vindicated.

And in the second parable, we're told that the tax collector was justified before God, or in other words, God vindicated him, even though the Pharisee thought very little of him.

In both parables, the idea of justification and vindication are central themes, and they are connected to what the Kingdom of God and the irresistible revolution looks like.

5. The Little Children and Jesus – Luke 18: 15-17 – who is Jesus? What is faith? The next section that Luke includes in chapter 18 is one that is quite famous to anyone who is involved with Christian Education and with Sunday School. This passage focuses on Jesus welcoming the little children as he taught and as he preached. We're told that as Jesus taught, people would bring children and babies to him. But the disciples, thinking that the irresistible revolution was only for adults, rebuked those parents. But Jesus famously tells them

***“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>17</sup> Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” – Luke 18: 16-17***

Now, I've always read this passage and have thought that the only thing Jesus was saying here is that the little children are welcomed. And this is true. I mean, this is a big reason why we welcome the children to have shakers and bang on the

instruments during the time of praise songs. But the point that Jesus is making here goes much deeper than that.

Jesus says, let the little children come to me... for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you those who do not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

What is Jesus saying here? Adults who are listening! You too need to have faith like a little child. The innocence, the trust that a child has for his or her mother and father is like no other and plays an integral part in the irresistible revolution.

**(slide - Alyx eating birthday cake)**

As Alyx turned 1 years old last week, both Alli and I have had a chance to really experience what that is all about. When I look at Alyx and I see her trust both Alli and I to love her, to provide for her, to keep her safe and to teach her, I'm beginning to understand what "full trust" looks like.

In the same way, Jesus is reminding us that as adults, we too must have that same kind of "full trust" in God when receiving the Kingdom of God and being a part of the irresistible revolution. Sometimes the irresistible revolution seems out of reach. We don't really understand what it looks like. Many people say the irresistible revolution is plain foolishness. But the irresistible revolution is so key to our Christian way of life.

6. The Rich Young Ruler and the Kingdom of God – Luke 18: 18-30 - letting go of the old symbols of identity

Luke seemingly jumps again when he gives this next account of the Rich Young Ruler and the Kingdom of God. But this passage has been key to my Christian formation. Or in other words, it has influenced me in the way I approach the Christian life.

In this parable we're told that there is a young man who was quite wealthy and he comes to Jesus and he says, "What must I do to inherit the kingdom of God?" - this is a fair question isn't it? In fact, this question is one that many of asked in the past. What must I do? How can I inherit the kingdom of God that you Jesus have talked so much about?

And Jesus responds by saying – You need to keep the commandments.

And the wealthy young man responds by saying – I've kept all of these thing since I was a child.

Now let's pause here for a second. If this wealthy young man answers Jesus by saying, I've done all of these things, I've kept the commandments. I've not stolen, I've not murdered, I've not committed adultery, I've not given false testimony, and I've honoured my father and mother, WHY does he come to Jesus asking what he

must do to inherit eternal life? Was this wealthy young man looking for a pat on the back? Was he there to brag to Jesus?

I believe that even though both Jesus and HE knew that he was living a good life, this young man was still looking for something more. He understood that religion and being religious was not enough. There was something missing in his life. And so he went to Jesus looking for the answer.

And How does Jesus respond to him? He says –

***“You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” – Luke 18: 22***

What is Jesus saying to him? He says, get rid of all of your wealth. Sell everything and give it to the poor. And you will have treasure in heaven. Then follow me.

Basically what Jesus is saying is that EVEN THOUGH you’re living a good life, you’re holding on to the past. Your IDENTITY is your house, your wealth, your riches, your possessions.

When it comes to the irresistible revolution, the FIRST step is to stop and take stock of who we are. If our lives are based around the material things, if we only care about the bottom line, if our identity is found in the possessions that we have, then

we have placed ourselves first and have put Jesus maybe second, maybe third, maybe tenth on our list. The irresistible revolution cannot happen if we hang on to the symbols of our past. We must have Christ at it's core.

And so when the wealthy young man hears this, how does he respond? We're told in the scriptures that he went away – sad because he was very wealthy.

And this is where Jesus is recorded to have said these words

***“How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! <sup>25</sup> Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” – Luke 18: 24 - 25***

In the scriptures – this is an eye opener for anyone who is looking to take their faith seriously. Where do you find your heart? And, where do you put your faith?

7. Jesus Predicts his Death for the Third Time – Luke 18: 31 – 34 tying it to the cross

Luke continues on and we see that we get one of these very disjointed places in scriptures. After teaching two parables, talking about children and then giving an

account of the rich young ruler, Luke seemingly shoe horns Jesus predicting his death for a third time.

Often times when I read this passage, I kind of gloss over it. Ok, Jesus predicts his death for the third time – NEXT! Get to the point Luke!

But if we really stop and pause and think about it – what is the point that Luke is trying to make? Remember, he writing to Theophilus and he’s trying to assure him of who Jesus is.

What Luke is trying to do is build momentum in this account. And what is the peak? What is the pinnacle of the gospel? The high point that Luke is trying do is to point Theophilus in the direction of the Cross AND the resurrection of Christ!

And so he includes this third prediction that Jesus gives to his disciple. It’s so easy to get lost I think in all of the miracles and good things that Jesus does. It’s so easy to remember the parables and the teachings. But what is Jesus trying to do. In all of these things, he is trying to teach the disciples and everyone who came to him, the reason why HE came.

And why did he come? Because ultimately, he came to die on the cross for you and I. We are separated from God because we are sinful. And the only way to bridge that gap is for Jesus to be that mediator. The irresistible revolution is based on this very

fact. God loved us so much that he sent his Son to die for us. He sent his son to restore us and to heal us. He sent his Son to make us whole.

8. A Blind Beggar Receives his Sight – Luke 18: 35 – 43 – the blind beggar sees, but the disciples do not

The irresistible revolution can be summed up in the last section of our teaching. In this last section, we're told that Jesus and the disciples were travelling to Jericho. And as they approached the city, they saw that a blind man was by the side of the road begging. As the crowds were going past him, he was told that Jesus was passing by. And right there and then, the beggar began to cry out to Jesus. The beggar says, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. But we're told that those who were leading the way told him to be quiet. But this didn't deter the man and he shouted even louder, repeating again – Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!

Finally Jesus stops and asks the man – ***(ONE SLIDE)***

***“What do you want me to do for you?” - Luke 18: 41***

And instead of just asking for money, the beggar asks for the one thing that would put his life together. He says,

***“Lord I want to see.” - Luke 18: 41***

And Jesus replies by saying - ***“Receive your sight; your faith has healed you.” - Luke 18: 42***

And we're told that he immediately received his sight and began to follow Jesus.

The irresistible revolution is this: We all are invited to take a look at our lives and know that the only person that can bring healing and wholeness is Jesus Christ. But we need to recognize our emptiness. We need to cry out for mercy. We need to ask Jesus to restore us so that we can be fully human again

9. The revolution is that Christ is leading renewal refreshment, calling us to do the same

Luke chapter 18 then, is much more than just a collection of accounts by Luke telling Theophilus of the good works that Jesus has done. Luke here is trying to tell both Theophilus and us what kind of a God we have and who Jesus Christ is.

In the first two parables we are taught that our God is a God of justice. He is a God that wants to vindicate us through Jesus dying on the cross.

But, we must have faith. The kind of faith that we need to have is contrasted both by the wealthy young man and the blind beggar. In the account of the wealthy young man, we are reminded that we need to cast off our identity in our old self. We cannot rely on the symbols of the past. Instead, we are reminded that our identity is in Christ and in the cross.

Jesus sacrificed himself for us. Jesus too had station and authority. He is God. But instead of hiding out in heaven, judging us for our sins, he gave up everything, left heaven and came down to earth for us. He engaged the people. He invited the children and he healed the blind.

The major contrast that we see though is that the blind man, although he couldn't see, had faith like a child that he WOULD be healed. And Jesus does this for him. The blind man at first couldn't see but now he does. He sees that he has been restored by Christ and he joins the crowds in following Jesus.

10. What is Synod meeting about? How do we participate as the larger body of Christ? – challenge the elders (?)

In all of this then, the church is invited to do the same thing as the blind man. We are invited to see that Jesus Christ's mission, his irresistible revolution is to restore the world that is so broken.

And that's what the work of Synod is all about as well. Synod is part of the larger body of Christ that makes up the Presbyterian Church here in British Columbia. The meetings that have gone on this weekend recognizes that we as the church have been invited to bring healing into this world. Synod and many of the meetings that church leaders attend may seem like "old dried toast". But when we take a look at the "business" they are trying to achieve it is more like "fresh bread" instead. Dried toast is stale. But we are invited to be a part of the irresistible revolution of telling people that Jesus restores and brings healing. In that we find excitement. In that we find "fresh bread". In that we find that Christ gives new life.

Keeping all of this in mind, let us look towards Christ and the cross and find ways to participate in the irresistible revolution.

Amen.