

How do you tie up a strong man so you can plunder his house? That’s the question in this morning’s passage from the Gospel of Mark. How do you muzzle the gospel, silence the saints, take down a mighty church? The answer is simple: You don’t. You don’t tackle someone while they still have some strength. Instead, you wait for them to become weak.

This past week, the lay leaders of our congregation met yet again for another TriBoard meeting. We began with a potluck dinner in Simmons Hall, and then turned our attention to the book that we have all been reading together, *Christianity After Religion* by Diana Butler Bass. The question of the book is this: What do you do when the church has become weak? When Satan has tied it up and plundered everything it has? When society has rejected its authority, doctrine and rituals? When community is no longer formed in the pews but is found instead on the internet? What do you do when the spiritual muscle of the church has become tired and flabby and weak? The answer of the book is this: You find a new vision for the church. So that’s what we spent our time talking about: What new vision do we have for the future of this congregation? It’s not an easy question to answer. Because vision isn’t something we can come up with on our own. Instead, it’s a gift of the Holy Spirit. It’s not a matter of meeting and talking and trying to figure it out as much as praying and waiting and trusting in the Lord.

And yet, there comes a time when you just can’t wait any longer – when there needs to be some action taken that will move us all forward. So, at the end of a 3-hour meeting, when everyone was feeling tired and flabby and weak, we made a decision to begin thinking in a new way. You may have noticed, when you came to church this morning, that the heading on the bulletin has changed. Instead of the words “The Packanack Community Church,” it now says “New Vision United Church of Christ.” The reason for that is two-fold. First, we have traditionally paid very little attention to what it means to be a member of our denomination. In fact, few people are even aware of it and even fewer could explain it to someone else. But, for the past two years, the members of the TriBoard have been discussing their desire to begin lifting up and living into the spirit of the United Church of Christ. We want people to know that we are a church that welcomes everyone regardless of who they are. So we decided to do what is very common (and, in fact, encouraged) by the United Church of Christ – we added the name of our denomination to the end of our church name.

The second reason for why we replaced the words “The Packanack Community Church” with the words “New Vision United Church of Christ” is because there has been an ongoing discussion about how our church is perceived by the greater community as being exclusive to residents of Packanack Lake. You may not hear this very often if you live here, but the two most common remarks that I hear from people who don’t know us very well are 1) “Do you need to live in Packanack Lake in order to go to church there?” and 2), “I would never go to that church because everyone there lives in Packanack Lake.” Like it or not, we have an image problem. And, if we are going to keep Satan from plundering our house, we are going to have to face up to the things that aren’t easy to hear. In a world of emergents, dot-coms and bloggers, the name “The Packanack Community Church” just doesn’t work anymore.

Now, I need to make it very clear that we have not changed the name of our church. That is something that not only cannot easily be done, but would never be done at the whim of a handful of people who have just sat through a 3-hour meeting. All we did is change the way we think about ourselves for the next three months. In June, July and August, we want to try out how it feels to see ourselves in a new way, and to live into a new vision of what it means to be the body of Christ in Wayne, NJ, today. Seeing the words “New Vision United Church of Christ” on the bulletin heading every Sunday will simply be a constant reminder that we are praying and waiting and trusting in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The other change to our bulletin heading that you may have noticed is that I am no longer listed as the Senior Minister. Obviously, I'm still here. But in place of my name are the words, "Minister: everyone." Because all of us are called by God to carry out the ministry of Jesus Christ. We are not a flock of sheep who are led by a single shepherd. We are a family of faith that takes care of each other. That's why, as the members of the TriBoard tried to come up with a new vision, we came up with the words, "Putting God's Love in Motion." Because that's what we are called to do. There's just one catch: We can't just do it; we need to do it in a way that other people will see. Listen to this quote from the book where the author is talking about how religion has moved away from the four walls of the Sanctuary and is now taking place in a "networked world" where people are connected electronically in a way that is fueling a new Great Awakening:

The new global Great Awakening is not contained by the stage of the local Congregational church... This awakening is being performed in the networked world, where the border between sacred and secular has eroded and where the love of God and neighbor... is being staged far beyond conventional religious communities. Although churches seem the most natural space to perform spiritual awakening, the disconcerting reality is that many people in Western society see churches more as museums of religion than sacred stages that dramatize the movement of God's spirit. What do you do to participate in awakening? To rouse others? To move to spread the good news of a new spiritual awakening? Perform faith. Display the kingdom in all that you do. Anticipate the reign of God in spiritual practices. Act up and act out for God's love.<sup>1</sup>

All of this is complicated and confusing, I know. And it would be easy to become discouraged and think that it's beyond our ability to understand. But the point of the passage is this: Instead of worrying about what the future of the church will be like, we need to be the church now. We need to connect with people now. We need to display the kingdom now. And we need to put God's love in motion now.

So here's my idea for how we can get that done. I would like all of us – young and old, technologically savvy or not – to go out into the world, find another person, and put God's love in motion. Do something that displays the kingdom of God, that rouses other people to love for their neighbor, and that spreads the good news about the "new spiritual awakening." And as you do so, take a photo of it and email it to me. If you don't know how to do that, find someone nearby with a smart phone, a tablet, or a digital camera. Trust me, they will be more than happy to take a photo of you and email it right on the spot to PastorKaryn@mac.com. Write it down and carry it with you. Because when I receive it, I'm going to post it to our church's Facebook page where we will slowly, over time, assemble an electronic photo album of all the people in our church who are putting God's love in motion. If you don't have a Facebook page, find someone with a smart phone or tablet. Tell them to show you our church's Facebook page. Trust me, they will be more than happy to do it. If you don't believe me, try it. And then imagine what kind of message that will send, when everyone in our congregation is taking photos, and posting photos, and sharing photos in a networked world where people all over the globe are able to see what the New Vision United Church of Christ is doing. We are putting God's love in motion, and (trust me) that's an image that people will want to be a part of.

How do you tie up a strong man so you can plunder his house? The answer is simple: You don't. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Bass, Diana Butler (2012-03-13). Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening (pp. 258-259). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.