**When the Church Stops Working**

By Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand

**Study Guide**

**Ch. 4:  “It Is Time to Wait, But for What?”**

Being stuck in traffic is a time-hallowed Chicago tradition, one that we do not enjoy.  We do not like to wait—it can lead to anxiety, anger, and even rage.  Will we get there on time!?

In this chapter, Root and Bertrand remind us of their claim that the church was not born at Pentecost or with dramatic growth and ministry that took place from that time on.  Instead, they point to 1) the disciples and followers of just being with Jesus between the resurrection and the ascension and 2) the waiting Jesus instructed them to do between the ascension and Pentecost.  The church was born from being and waiting, not from doing.  In fact, our authors claim that the church was created by “Jesus’ command to wait as prayer, and prayer as waiting.”

Jesus’s followers were to wait for God to act.  Their actions were to be a response to God’s actions.

**We are to wait *together*, not alone by ourselves in a room contemplating our navels.**  We wait together by talking, sharing, telling stories, praying, eating, and all manner of just being together.  When it feels like the church is not thriving, we feel that we should be doing something.  Then the waiting together gets pushed to the side, and we get caught in the trap of innovation and acceleration.  But it is in the waiting and the being together that we encounter the living God.

**God Chooses Saul:** Waiting is hard, and we get antsy.  Peter got that way, and so called a meeting to fill the disciple position that Judas vacated with a noose. Matthias was appointed, a decision instigated by Peter and executed by lots—a church administrative act.  Then we never hear of Matthias again.  Did Jesus’s followers jump the gun by doing rather than waiting?  Later, in Acts 9, Jesus calls Saul, who we know as Paul. Now him we hear about! (He wrote some good books; check them out.)

The first thing Saul was to do after his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ was to wait.  We think of Saul/Paul, as an incredibility busy guy, traveling from town to town, preaching, planting churches, getting arrested and beaten up (he included that bit in his resume!).  But his amazing career began with just waiting.

There is a time for doing, but our doing, as the church, must arise from our waiting.  We do not jump into action and appoint a Matthias, to fix our problems.  That produced nothing.  The church grew only after God acted, and the disciples’ actions were in response to God’s actions, the coming of the Holy Spirit.

**Storied Waiting:** This waiting is not just passing time twiddling our thumbs.  We wait by telling the story of Jesus, rehearsing that story so that it penetrates and shapes our story.   Paul had the story wrong at first, and he acted on that wrong story with his vicious persecution of the church. (Acts 9)  Then he encountered Jesus, was struck blind, and forced to wait for Ananias.   That waiting resulted in him seeing again and “seeing” the right story.  His ministry gets into gear, once the waiting and storying is complete. Our impatience in waiting rise from stories we tell ourselves in which our needs and wants are at the center.  It puts us into fight or flight mode when events do not go according to our script—when we feel like we are stuck in traffic when we have somewhere urgent and important to go.  Waiting changes that story by getting us off of our script and onto a better one.

By waiting together, we deprioritize our personal stories—where we are the central characters and it is all about us—and open up the narrative of our life to God’s story, but also to the stories of those around us.

**Kenosis**:  Growth, personally and corporately as the church, comes as we decenter ourselves from our stories.  This a death by humility.  In Phil 2, Paul cites an early church hymn that describes Jesus as emptying (Greek: *kenosis*) himself in the incarnation.  Decentering ourselves from our stories is such a emptying; it requires humility—it is sort of a death, the kind of death Aziz Ansari experienced when he career crashed and when he was at this grandmother’s deathbed. He and his ambitions were no longer the ruling story of his life.

“The church is a community that believes that it is not the star of its own story.”(74)  We accomplish that by rehearsing and remembering God’s story, the gospel.  We witness “to God’s acts in the world.”(75)  Our waiting is a participation in what God is doing, and it generates an identity for us that is rooted in more than our own anxious existence.  We become about something more than just ourselves or just our church.

When our concerns for our church drive us to anxiety and action rather than waiting, we put our church at the center of its story.  At that point, we have stopped hearing God.  This is hard to face when membership is declining, budget shortfalls are on the horizon, and our congregation is looking more like a senior’s home than a complete church family.  We jump into crisis mode and get to work, but that is the wrong work. It takes our eyes off of God’s actions and God’s story and puts them on our problems and puts the church at the center of the story.

**REFLECTION:**  What is at the center of the story of Southminster Presbyterian Church?  Do we see the current chapter of that story as a crisis?   Are we concerned that Southminster might not be here in a decade?  What is the hardest part of committing to wait when we feel like we are in a crisis?  How do we cultivate waiting in those times?  Perhaps we are not in crisis at the moment.  So, should we be cultivating waiting, anyway?  What does waiting look like to you?  What does waiting together look like to you?