

“All Together Now!”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

May 3, 2020 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Hymns for Worship Video – May 3, 2020

The Lord’s my Shepherd - #11 in the Book of Praise

The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want. He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; he leadeth me the quiet waters by.

My soul he doth restore again, and me to walk doth make
Within the paths of righteousness, even for his own name’s sake.

Yea, though I walk in death’s dark vale, yet will I fear none ill,
For thou art with me, and thy rod and staff me comfort still.

My table thou has furnish-ed in presence of my foes;
My head thou dost with oil anoint and my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life shall surely follow me
And in God’s house forevermore, my dwelling place shall be.

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“The Church is Wherever God’s People” #484 in the Book of Praise

The church is wherever God’s people are praising,
Singing God’s goodness for joy on this day.
The church is wherever disciples of Jesus
Remember his story and walk in his way.

The church is wherever God’s people are helping,
Caring for neighbours in sickness and need.
The church is wherever God’s people are sharing
The words of the Bible in gift and in deed.

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Scripture Text: Acts 2:42-47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Meditation

There is a lot of talk about how we are going to get through the pandemic together. We are hearing multiple references from medical personnel, political leaders at every level, broadcasters, and celebrities. There is a real focus on how important it is for us to all take the precautions, to care for one another, and to remember we are all in this together as we persevere.

Together, and yet apart.

Community is important. Humans have an intrinsic need for other people. Being isolated and disconnected is not something with which most people would say they are comfortable. Part of the way we are getting through the pandemic is with the hope for better days when we will be able to physically gather again. We know that one day we will emerge from this situation with tremendous relief and joy that we can interact with each other in person.

Community is where relationships begin and grow.

It is where we find support and encouragement.

It is how we celebrate the joys and weather the sorrows in life.

It is how we work, worship, play, and help.

English poet and preacher John Donne penned this popular poem in the winter of 1623 when he was seriously ill:

No man is an island,

entire of itself;

every man is a piece of the continent,

*a part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less,
as well as if a promontory were.
as well as if a manor of thy friend's
or of thine own were.
Any man's death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind;
and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee.*

Obviously the language of the poem is typical of the 17th century, and it applies to all of humankind. The poem is an excerpt from a greater essay that meditates on “the essence of the human place in the world - past and present” (Goodreads.com) An article I read this week reflects that “in his meditation on death, Donne writes that all beings are one with God. The rest of the essay... is just as poignant as the famous passage. Donne compares suffering to gold, arguing that we can never have enough of our neighbors’ pain: ‘No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it.’ In other words: No one suffers alone, and being aware of another’s pain only makes us stronger and more able to live.”¹

I think we could say this poem resonates with us now as we deal with the isolation of the current pandemic. Some of us may have moments when we feel so disconnected from others that it seems we are alone on an island. As I am speaking with people of all ages throughout the week, I am hearing more comments about longing to be with people, to give and receive hugs, to have coffee with a friend or family member. I have made a similar comment to a very close cousin – that as soon as this is over I will be making a trip to see her. Not being able to visit her now is difficult and I confess to not being terribly patient while I wait!

¹ qz.com, June 24, 2016, in an article about the poem resonating with those dealing with Brexit

The longing is real.

I think all of us can say we have a sense of longing to see the people who are dear to us. Whether they live around the corner or in another community, province, or country, we want to be together.

People with loved ones in long term care residences are having a particularly difficult time, not being able to visit. Spouses, children, grandparents, are separated from one another by a pane of glass. Residents are missing the visits from family and friends. I have heard stories of staff making it possible for residents to have video calls with loved ones, and of people standing outside on cell phones while residents talk on the phone from inside. People are recognizing the importance of community in these weeks of staying distant from one another in order to care for one another.

People need people.

The church of Acts 2 illustrates the importance of the community of faith, but not in terms of a static set of practices. The community we see in this brief passage extends beyond its borders, or rather keeps its borders in a constant state of transformation. Luke, the author, is looking back on what happened after the Holy Spirit descended upon those gathered in Jerusalem, and the church has a well-established habit of looking back through rose-coloured glasses, so to speak. We remember how things used to be as being better and more fruitful than they are now. We find places to put the blame for things changing. But in this passage in Acts, when we read it carefully, we don't see a memory of glory days. We see a church that was being newly formed -- daily.

The Greek word for 'common' in this passage can refer to that which is commonly shared. We might hear it in this context in communion as we break the common bread and drink from the common cup. We share these things among ourselves. It can also mean those things that are not set apart as holy – those things that are simply the normal stuff of life. As we read these verses we see that the common, ordinary stuff of life is being re-oriented to a divine purpose. Fellowship and shared meals are common activities that have become the love of God being lived out in common ways. Community becomes about more than gathering in the same space at the same time. It becomes about transformation from ordinariness to holiness.

A Professor of Homiletics at Duke University Divinity School has written a commentary article on this passage that reflects these ideas about the common life of the church in Acts. She writes:

“What I find most remarkable is the picture Luke sketches of a community that is actively forming its members through practices of faith at the same time that it remains open to newness and change. It is a balancing act... The goal of faith practices is to produce a distinct identity, to develop a shared vocabulary and set of priorities, to build a community that can carry each other’s joys and burdens. The problem is that such formation can often create a rigidity of form, a settled script of behavior, and a lack of porousness in the communal boundary. In other words, such formational communities are precisely the kind of communities that have trouble with people being ‘added to their number’ daily. They can struggle making space for difference. And yet, Pentecost gave the early church a community that was full of difference, a community that needed to build a common life even as it changed from day to day... The borders of the church—its identity and character—have substance. They can be seen and described in this text. And yet, as the text also makes clear, these borders move in time. They respond to the new face at the table. They learn new scripts and live into new roles. They make room for those that are different, even as they stand ‘together’ (vs. 44) in worship, service, learning and fellowship. They are open to the surprise of the Spirit and to the awe-filled work of God’s salvation – even God’s salvation of the borders themselves. These are borders that perform, and through God’s help, perform faithfully.”²

Will our understanding of community have been changed when the pandemic is over? I expect so, in some ways.

Our priorities may be different.

Our perception of what is truly important will shift.

People are experiencing need in ways they have not experienced it before. Others have become more aware of the need, and that they are in a position to be able to help.

² This quote and the information for the 2 preceding paragraphs taken from workingpreacher.org Commentary on Acts 2:42-47, written by Jerusha Matsen Neal, resources for May 3, 2020.

Society at every level is doing what it can to help lighten the burden of stress through financial aid, mental health resources, education support and information sharing.

Churches are having to reorient themselves to provide worship through a variety of methods;

pastoral care through basic and advanced technology;

prayer for those who cannot gather in the usual way.

In all of these things, and more, we are experiencing a renewed focus. One definition of 'community' is a sense of 'fellowship with others.' It's about being connected – not necessarily in person, but by a common attitude, belief, experience. We, the church, are connected by a common faith. We don't all express it in the same way, but we are all connected by it.

People have been commenting that they hope our society will have a different feel to it when this is over. We know life won't be the same as it was before COVID-19. Will there be a gentler, more compassionate awareness of the needs of others?

Will our priorities shift from the acquisition of wealth to the nurturing of relationships?

Will we remember what it is like to be separated, and to offer kindness in creative ways that break through isolation?

How will the church be changed in its outreach and in its invitation and welcome to those who come seeking the community they long for? If we have the mind of the church in Acts, our focus will shift even more onto the needs of others, and away from our own desire to have things the way they used to be. After all this is over, I think we will all be changed, and I pray the church will experience a deep and lasting transformation. We will continue to live our common faith in a community that is strongly rooted in the One who calls us to worship and serve within God's loving purpose. May we also be surprised by the movement of the Holy Spirit, and open to whatever transformation God will work in his church. May God give us courage and grace to meet the days ahead with faithful trust in his transforming power. Amen.