

MUSINGS ON COMMUNITY LIFE

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, May 26, 2019)

In her insightful and inspiring book *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes tells a parable of an old man who is dying. He calls his people to his side and gives one short, sturdy stick to each of his family members and friends. "Break the stick," he instructs them. With a little effort, they all snap their sticks in half. The old man said, "This is how it is when a soul is alone without anyone. They can be easily broken." Next, he gives each of his kin another single stick, and says, "This is how I would like you to live after I pass. Put your sticks together in bundles of twos and threes. Now, break these bundles in half."

They found it challenging to break the bundles of sticks. The old man smiles, "We are strong when we stand with another soul. When we are with another, we cannot be broken."

For me, this parable describes who we are as a church. Each of us comes into community alone, and alone, we do have inner resources that enable us to meet the challenges of life. However, when we are together, we are even stronger because we embrace life and its challenges together, we celebrate and laugh, we share ideas, opinions, and wisdom and we grieve and care, finding comfort when our inner resources fail us.

Comedian Lily Tomlin said it best: "We're all in this together, by ourselves." Each of us has everything we need to take charge of our lives, but we also have the added blessings of a loving, supportive community. That is a win/win situation because we have personal autonomy as well as community engagement and kinship.

Today I invite us to celebrate who we are as a community of faith, to recognize the gift of this community in our lives, and to believe that in this present moment we have what we need to sustain us now and in the future.

I invite you to ponder for a moment the question: "What has brought you here this morning?" Perhaps you have come seeking some peaceful moments away from the busyness of everyday life, to connect with a friend, to escape the loneliness of a quiet house, to offer a service, to pray and sing and eat, to grow and to deepen your spiritual life. We all come to this place for our own personal reasons.

What keeps me at St. David's is my genuine desire to participate with you on this adventure of life and Christian faith, striving for justice, acting with integrity, extending to one another our warm-hearted love, open-minded acceptance, and our commitment, optimism and hope.

But I stand here today knowing that St. David's exists on the precipice of our present time and our future possibility. In this in-between period, we have much to ponder. Next Sunday, after worship, is our Annual General Budget Meeting, and we will, again, face the reality of another deficit budget knowing that our future is not guaranteed. Over the past year, we have been hearing much about the EDGE program whose goal it is to enable us to understand what we must do to secure our future.

People have been hearing that perplexing word "change," that we do not like. Realistically it is essential for us to set our sights on new ways of being as we move into the future. However, let us not lose sight of the fact that change occurs slowly and this community as it is, is still the faith home that we come to for spiritual nurture and insight, for comfort and care, for guidance and learning, and for celebrating and sharing meals. It will continue to be our spiritual place in which we grow our faith and our love.

This morning I want to talk about what it means to be a community of faith in this present time. I like the interpretation of a spiritual community as expressed by Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hahn. "It is possible that the next Jesus or Buddha will not take the form of an individual. The next Jesus or Buddha may take the form of a community practicing understanding, tolerance, and kind-heartedness; a community practicing mindful and grace-filled living."

The concept of Jesus as a community is compelling. I think that the early church in its formative years embraced this vision of Jesus as the new community and his commandment of love resided at the heart of its faith. How did this happen?

Well, something akin to a miracle occurred when the apostles gathered at a time known as Pentecost and all those gathered were filled with the Spirit. Pentecost is celebrated on June 9 this year, but I am highlighting this scripture today because it feels appropriate.

This Pentecost story was written 50 years after what might have been the actual event, so the details had likely evolved over time. The text suggests that a strange, miraculous event occurred that startled the people. The miracle was that everyone heard in a way that made them understand each other. They "got it" simultaneously, they caught the vision that earlier Hebrew Prophets and Jesus had spoken about, a concept of difference within unity. Women, men, children, Jews, gentiles, slaves, free: all were one in Christ, in it together, by themselves. Just as each one of us may use different language to describe our faith, we come together on common ground and a shared faith.

As is always the case with biblical scholarship, we wonder about the reliability of such an unlikely story and it may have altered with each telling, however, as one scholar said, "It's not history to go by. It's a story to grow by."

If we consider what happened within those first Christian communities after "that event," we see the story's merit. The Pentecost message fed their imaginations and their faith. People realized that they could be more productive, faithful, safe, and effective together in community. The Book of Acts articulates the evolution of the early church as a result of the Pentecost telling.

The original Christian communities viewed themselves in terms of a movement, the Jesus Movement. Paul talked about the church as being many parts of one body with each part having an important function, and when one part suffered, the whole suffered. There existed a strong sense of commitment to the gathered body and a deep tie between individuals to ensure safety, health, and security.

These communities were not fixed or absolute; they were broad, daring, fluid, evolving, and active holding at their center the message of Jesus, to "love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." They were movements of love in that love was the heartbeat of the community's shared life and the energy that informed all actions, behaviors, and thoughts. In their endeavors to meet the needs of people living in their time and place and to advance the message of the Christ, they share what they had communally and with the poor and they created meaningful rituals that included all.

When we consider the history of the United Church of Canada, we will notice that for a very long time, the church was like the ancient Christian communities. While it is an organized church, it reflected the original house churches in that it was an active, faithful, fluid, growing, and daring spiritual presence in Canada.

Pre-1980s the United Church challenged Canadian mindsets and prejudices. Through its social gospel focus of justice, compassion and service to the larger community, it fought for the rights of women, the poor, and the LGBTQ2 community. It recognized its role in the injustices perpetrated against the Indigenous peoples of Canada and apologized. It addressed environmental issues and reached out around the world through its mission and service programs.

Many of you remember St. David's and other churches that were large, active, and energetic; living communities sharing their faith inside and outside the church.

In the mid-80s when General Council voted to accept all people as members and that any member could be ordained or commissioned, including homosexual people, the church saw a significant decline in membership and leadership and unfortunately it stopped being outward focused becoming primarily concerned with preservation and survival. Many United Churches lost their vision and their desire to engage the world and now find themselves in an unsettling place not quite sure how to be the church in this modern world.

As I earlier suggested, Christianity's history is a story of change and adaptation. Paul, Peter, and other church leaders continually moved from change to adaptation, shifting and adjusting, listening long and hard to their hearts hoping they would discern the ideal path of faith in order to be relevant in the societal and spiritual ecosystems of the time. In doing so they were able to build on their strengths, their wisdom, and to become a strong force of Christ-like love in their world.

In the past thirty years or so many United Churches have lost their ability to adapt to the new environments in which they have found themselves. Churches are part of the fabric of society, and at one time they contributed to the health of the society, but now they struggle to know how to be a vital part of modern culture. What we know about evolution is that species that adapt survive and those that do not adapt do not survive. Congregations who dare to adjust to the current realities of the world are the most effective and have the most significant impact.

This does not mean that a community of faith must dramatically change how it worships and exists together, but it does have to see beyond its own walls and seek to discern that one thing that will inspire consensus and passion in living its faith in the world. This may mean adapting our methods and mission in order to be relevant and active. We must be, as the early church was, forward leaning and forward-thinking. This is why we are participating in the EDGE program.

As we meet next week to talk about the budget, I encourage us to remember what we value about St. David's and to let that be what we hold on to as we discern how we will move into our future, and as we do so let us also remember that it is essential to trust and believe, to be hopeful and optimistic, to be daring and enthusiastic and unwilling to leave the problem in someone else's hands.

We are in this together because together we are a mightier force of faith. We must build each other up, look out for each other's best interests, bear one another burdens and be kind, honor and respect one another's thoughts and opinions, serve each other, forgive each other, and above all

love wholly and heartedly. And, as someone once said, “If there is anything Godlike about God is that God dared to imagine everything. We need to dare to imagine anything, together.”

We are a community of faith on a spiritual adventure, striving to be fully human together and to experience a unity of purpose and faithfulness. We are a Christ-infused community on a mission to understand how we can be an integral part of the web of life and how to nurture our spiritual selves and be God’s love in this place and in the community.

I continue to be blessed by you and the faith life here at St. David’s. It is a delight to watch you reflect Jesus’ vision of unity in community, to articulate your humanity and faith, to be intentionally inclusive and to grow and deepen your spiritual lives.

You are accomplishing this through the many ways that you help each other learn, understand, and care: being wide open with your compassion so that anyone who enters this community feels accepted and valued; quietly doing what needs to be done; being diligent in your financial commitment to this community, for our sustainability depends on our collective energy, commitment, money, and personal support.

There are many ways to demonstrate God’s love, but only one spirit, one vibrant community. We are in this all together, by ourselves. I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. So, let us be it enthusiastically, faithfully, courageously, hopefully, prayerfully, and above all, lovingly. Let us celebrate St. David’s this day, let us honor who we as individuals and who we are together. Let us laugh, share food, enjoy the sun, and feel the joy of being in each other’s company living the love of God intentionally.

As the old man said to his family, “When we are with another, we cannot be broken.” May this be true for us.