

SERMON: “Taking On The World”

First United Church, Waterloo – Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021

PRAYER: “Often we ask, O God, that we might really hear your Word, that we might be truly guided by the wisdom and light of Jesus, that your Spirit might move among us to empower us and equip us to be faithful disciples. What would happen, O God, if we meant it? What would happen if our prayers were answered? Maybe today we’ll get a sense of that. Maybe today our fires of Pentecost will come a-blazing. God, help our “maybe” become a “Yes!” Amen

You might hear a snicker or two if during a meeting of a struggling congregation, someone audibly whispers: “You know, a good fire would solve a lot of our problems.” For a moment perhaps, it’s funny. One might even think there’s some truth in it. But there isn’t. True, congregations that have experienced a church building fire, get a wad of insurance money. They rebuild and correct earlier structural deficiencies and inadequacies. But they will usually get right back into all the familiar patterns and routines of ministry with which they had grown comfortable. They may not be strapped for cash for a while; but, they may not experience a lot of numerical growth, or explore new visions either. And, sometime later down the road, they will be a struggling congregation again. A good fire, in another sense, would in fact be a blessing to a lot of struggling congregations. A metaphorical one, where the people who worship and gather there got set on fire. Then new life might come into the old bones in the valleys of congregational worry and despair, when something like an early twenty-first century Day of Pentecost revivifies them.

1 DAY ONE

Let’s rewind the time clock for a moment to that first-century. The disciples have had several meetings with the risen Jesus. One of his final messages to them was “wait until power comes upon you.” Though he promises to be with them always, he vanishes, ascends up into the heavens. The science of all that is troublesome to our modern minds, but Jesus is gone. The baffled disciples still huddle behind locked doors, still wondering, and just waiting. The only activity noted by their storyteller, is the election of someone to replace Judas. Adding Matthias to make them twelve again, feels like the new normal. There were more followers gathered there in addition to that inner designated dozen. Jesus did say something about them becoming witnesses to his resurrection. But where and how would they go about that? Anyone want to try a pilot project? No takers. They remained huddled together: hidden, hesitant, uncertain, inactive. Ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty days after Easter morning pass when, “Shazam!”, something like a storm-warning rush of wind swirls through the room and it felt like flames of fire landed on each of them so that every neuron in their brains was caught up in synapses of rapid messaging, and their hearts circulated heated blood.

It was an infusion of empowerment that sent them rushing out into public plazas to give voice to proclamations about the transforming power of the risen Jesus, its potential, its meaning for life, its impact of hope for the world.

It was a time for a Jewish festival in Jerusalem. The city was packed that day with pilgrims and god-seekers from all over the Mediterranean basin and that Middle Eastern region along with throngs of local citizens.

All of them were within earshot of those suddenly-sermonizing disciples on soap boxes. Amazingly, that group of Galilean Jesus-followers were enabled to share testimony in a variety of foreign languages in addition to Aramaic.

People from no less than sixteen different ethnic groups and cultures heard about the marvellous new possibilities God had opened up through Jesus of Nazareth, God-in-our-midst for a time, then crucified and risen, now exalted as Sovereign of all creation.

“Attention! Attention, s’il vous plait, je veux vous dire des exploits de Jésus de Nazareth ...

Achtung! Jesus war Gott unter uns ... Neh, Iesous Xristos, huios theos ...

Hablo de Jesús, crucificado y resuscitado ...Iesu, atarashi seimei ho minamoto ...

novaya zhizn’ dlya vsego tvoreniya ...potenza di trasformazione per oggi e per sempre ...”

We may find the details and description of this event fanciful, even incredulous; but, regardless of that, we cannot dismiss the outcome of this story.

Those disciples who somehow caught fire set others around them on fire for lives of faith in God.

The church of Christ was born and would spread like wildfire throughout the repressive, controlling, and mighty Roman Empire.

And, though she tried very hard to extinguish it, it was Roma’s days who were numbered.

And, did we catch it?

From the get-go, the church was meant to be an international, multicultural movement.

The people in their first public audience came from places

to the north, south, east, and west of Jerusalem. All four directions. All the known world.

The faith, passion, witness, ministry, and sense of engagement in mission that consumed and motivated that group of inspired Galileans was set loose to take on the world.

II SO, TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BELIEVERS ...

So, here we are, numbered among twenty-first century followers of Jesus.

What’s our story? What are we about? How are we doing at taking on the world?

How are we re-presenting Jesus in an attractive, life-altering, other-engaging way?

There are some congregations and churches doing it by resistance, persistence, and resilience.

They haven’t had much choice like the churches of South Africa a few decades ago.

Or the recent flourishing of the Anglican Church in Uganda.

That didn’t happen overnight. It began with Janan Luwum, not a household name to us, but he is well-known in Uganda and throughout Africa.

In 1974 he became the Anglican archbishop and dared to criticize Idi Amin.

On February 16, 1977, Amin sent in some troops to brutally murder the Rt. Rev. Luwum. That homicide shocked Uganda and the world at large. Christians in Uganda were not, however, intimidated; rather, they were strengthened. Soon Idi Amin went the way of all terrifying dictators: inglorious exile and finally, death. The martyrdom of Janan Luwum offered Christ's church in Uganda inspiration and renewal. In 2001, Luwum was made a saint, and the Anglican Church in Uganda continue growth spurts. Currently, it is one of the largest churches in Africa with over ten million followers. In similar, but different contexts, that story finds its own version of re-telling and re-enactment in Liberia, Nigeria, West Africa, Sudan, and in Vietnam, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, South Korea and the People's Republic of China. Churches in all these nations have endured persecution and gargantuan horrors, but all of them are thriving and still extending their reach and influence. *1* Something about Jesus, incarnate, crucified, risen and what he signifies, still catches fire there.

Is that our dilemma in Canada and North America? We aren't persecuted or repressed because our host cultures are benign towards us? or generally indifferent? When was the last time the Canadian churches got good press? When was the last time our Federal or provincial governments paid them any serious attention when they raised up issues of justice? What do you think are the prevailing perceptions of churches in our culture: old-fashioned, irrelevant, set in their moralistic ways, stuck in bureaucracy and institutionalism? Or scandalized by sexual improprieties or economic malfeasance?

What if enough church people raised a stink with the government and oil companies about the insane and manipulated price of gasoline? Can we imagine by collective action that we might help bring those prices down to something far more manageable and less crippling to our present economy? You bet your Bible we just might.

As we struggle through this time of global pandemic, yes, some ministry and mission has been curtailed, but the church hasn't been full shut down. In fact, we have been increasingly discovering how to be a hybrid church. Some congregations, even First United, were already sliding into it before the pandemic. It's not like we weren't aware that times like these were coming. In 2005, George Barna released his findings from interviewing 20 million American adults as to either why they stayed in church or why they left it or just ignored it. He published them in a book entitled Revolution. Here's one prod towards expanded reach and influence that he offered over 15 years ago: *"There are people who are less interested in attending church than in being church. We found that there is a significant distinction in the minds of many people between the local church – with a small 'c' – and the universal church – with a capital 'C'. Many people drop out of church in order to intensify their relationship with God.*

Instead of wondering how people could possibly do this, we need to bring the intensity and integrity of the house churches, Internet, marketplace ministries, and other revolutionary forms of expressing faith into our sanctuaries if we would catch this wind of the Spirit.” 2

Hey, hey, hey First United, along with almost every other church, we’re already into that. Maybe it’s still through baby steps, but it’s a calling to ride these new prevailing winds. Now, maybe more than ever, John Wesley’s words are true: “the world is your parish”. What gifts do we already have that will help us extend our reach? Who is keen to revitalize and re-energize our in-person worship, ministry, and mission once we move back into in-person gatherings? That’s alongside continued online offerings. Who has a burning passion to give leadership and energy to small, house-church like groups, or prayer circles, or life-support coaching, or spiritual direction? Who can help teach others how to offer ministry in fresh, creative ways? Oh, pray, pray, pray for a rush of the Spirit to light some new fires in our midst.

CONCLUSION

Commenting on the story of that first Pentecost, American pastor Edwin Cooper wrote: *“The decision to do what was closest to one’s hand (replace Judas with Matthias) and to feel in so doing a sense of normalcy return is an absurd decision Replacing Judas was not the problem. In fact, it was the easy thing to do. But re-presenting Jesus with integrity and authenticity would occupy the church of Jesus Christ to this very day. That’s a task we’re still struggling to do.” 3 (written in 2012)*

Oh, yes, God being our Helper, let that be the task we are yet struggling and eager to do. We can, but will we? Can we imagine ourselves actually doing it? San Francisco Theological Seminary professor Donald McCullough wondered about that. In *If God’s Grace is So Amazing, Why Don’t We Like It?* he shared an illustration from his own life.

He and his wife met some friends for dessert at a local hotel. While heading towards the patio, they passed by a banquet room where an anniversary party was being held for a Lebanese couple. On one side of the room were dancers who had linked arms around each other’s shoulders forming a circle. The dance was simple. Step, step left. Kick. Step right. Kick. Repeat. The dance was so captivating that McCullough and his wife and friends found themselves swaying at the doorway. Finally, his wife said, *“Let’s join them.”*

For a few moments they seriously considered crashing the party, but then” 4

On that first day of Pentecost, the church of Christ burst into life and hope and witness through disciples empowered and set on fire in order to set others on fire and to take on the world around them. Their passionate message and mission was about how God in Jesus invites everyone to fabulous party: the party of wholeness, fullness of life.

So, twenty-first century followers of Jesus connected to First United Church, Waterloo,
The time has come to get beyond dancing in a tight closed circle afraid to open it up.
Standing in the doorways of our community and culture,
do we notice God's dance already going on around us?
In what ways are we feeling fired up to help our culture learn how to dance to God's tune?
Is there already a burning passion within us to re-present Jesus with integrity and authenticity?
Or are we open to welcoming the Holy Spirit to re-ignite us?
During this interim time we will continue to explore and enter into discernment
seeking some clarity and focus for where and to what is God's Spirit calling us
at this place and time.
Listen for the wind. Watch for the fire. Expect to be energized, equipped and propelled
for taking on the world as agents of the still in-breaking realm of God.
Let us bring others and come with others and with all creation to the banquet table,
the table of wholeness of life and fullness of life, the table of abundance of life for all.

Notes

1 Donald Denton, "You Shall Live!", *LectionAid* (Vol. 14, No. 3), (LectionAid Inc., Boulder, CO: June 4, 2006 – August 27, 2006), page 1.

2 *Ibid.*, page 3.

3 Edward Cooper, "All Who Remain Unite", *LectionAid* (Vol. 20, No. 3), (LectionAid Inc., Boulder, CO: March 4, 2012 – May 27, 2012), page 66.

4 In *LectionAid* 2006 as above, page 4.