

SERMON/REFLECTION: “Truly a Time for Faith”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, September 12, 2021

PRAYER: “Let us hear your voice, feel the assurance of your presence and the reverberant energy of your Spirit, O God, as we continue our journey of faith in life during the unforeseen and unprecedented times in which we are still situated. Let us be upheld, encouraged and guided by the heart and light of Jesus, the Christ. We pray in his name. Amen”

People of faith in a community of faith, that’s who we are.

People of faith in a nation and world in which there are numerous other people of faith.

That’s who we are.

There may be others with us today checking us out.

Some of them may have some faith in their bloodstream.

Some may be seeking for it, wondering is there anything to it? Does it really make a difference?

I’m not talking about faith as a set of beliefs, of ideas or concepts about God or the Divine.

I’m not talking about faith that only finds expression in words.

I’m talking about faith as a lived experience,

as an embodied and transforming way of journeying through life.

Anyone observing how this congregation interacts, seeks to engage in ministry and mission,

and listens in on some of our conversations will note that faith is something we value,

that faith is quite likely one of this congregation’s core values.

(A few words on the side to those who are part of this congregation

I along with our Transition Team are inviting you to reflect on that to see if it rings true for you.

In the weeks ahead there will be invitations to reflect on and have conversation

about several other core values we feel we have heard or noticed.

The intent is to reach some consensus about them to acknowledge that they are foundational to how we proceed to engage in ministry and mission in the immediate and more distant future.)

Today, I invite us to focus our attention on how faith has helped us and can yet help us

as we have navigated and continue to navigate the troubled waters

of a world besieged by the coronavirus pandemic. Truly these are times for faith.

I PROMPTS FROM GOD’S WORD

I want to offer a couple of prompts from Scripture as springboards for our reflection and encouragements to continue to stay active.

The first prompt is resonant in Jesus’ almost brash injunction to his disciples

that if they could summon up even a mustard seed of daring faith, they could “move mountains”.

(See Matthew 17:14-20)

That brings to mind his earlier use of that metaphor in a short parable offered along the way.

It was about how the realm of God is like a mustard seed planted in a field

that can mushroom into a tree-like shrub creating home and shelter for lots of birds.

Seems evident to me he was referring to wild mustard seeds,
like garlic mustard that gets invasive.

It's about the power of even a small act of faith, a daring moment of vulnerability, a risk taken
that could have a far-reaching ripple effect.

One small act of faith can serve to nudge the realm of God even a few more meters forward,
where people and creation get to experience wholeness of life, fullness and abundance of life.

One small act of faith that may just have the potential to go viral in a good and healing way.

The second prompt leaps off that pages of a New Testament letter bearing the name of James,
words that frame the writer's nudge to his listeners and congregations in chapter 2:

*"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?...
For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead."*

In Eugene Petersen's paraphrase *The Message* the middle portion of that text is rendered:

"Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?"

I can hear one of you agreeing by saying, 'Sounds good.

You take care of the faith department. I'll handle the works department.'

*Not so fast. You can no more show me your works apart from faith
than I can show you my faith apart from my works.*

Faith and works. Works and faith. They go together hand in glove." (vs. 17b-18)

II LET'S NAME IT

Let us acknowledge that some of our small, maybe not so small, ventures in faith,
some of our little or not so little works of faith during these uncertain and harried times
have helped us, helped others, even helped nudge the world and creation

into the wholeness and newness of life that are that inbreaking of God's realm on earth.

Let us recognize that faith in action isn't always about movement and helping hands.

Prayer is an act of faith. Meditation and contemplation are also acts of faith.

Just being present with another is an act of faith. Having patience is an act of faith.

Our faith has found expression in our ongoing acts of caring.

Covid-19 has brought about numerous forms of loss and grief,

countless hours of anxiety and other psychic stressors,

long stretches of isolation and loneliness for many.

And yet, we have endeavoured to uphold one another through prayer, phone calls,
on-line community times, even some in-person visitations.

We have sought to comfort those who have lost loved ones, lost friends, lost pets.

We have mourned with business owners of shops we used to frequent now closed.

Some of us have sought to support those who have lost jobs.

We have sought to honour, offer gratitude, and pray for frontline workers.

Covid-19 has made access to assistance even harder for those on society's margins.

We have found some ways through acts of faith of assisting some of them.

Meals from Fridays at First were served,

other meals for homeless persons were made and given over for distribution.

Hats, mitts, and scarves on the fence started as a small act of caring and concern

and in its own way did go somewhat viral.

Protective wear for summer also got hung on our fences.
Raised gardens were built. Feel free to help yourself to the produce that's there.
Over 900 orange ribbons and some signage bear our testimony in faith
of our shared sorrow and shame over unearthened bodies of indigenous children
on former residential school sites. We were not numbed. Our hearts yet ache.
And we know that reconciliation and redress is still high on our nation's future agenda,
that it will mean more than some renamed streets and buildings and torn-down statues.
By faith, we as a community have continued to embrace others in our community.
Covid-19 forced us into locking down our church facilities except for restricted access.
Since mid-March 2019, we haven't held in-person services of worship until now.
But by faith, we still figured out how to celebrate God's presence and power in worship.
By faith, we found the resources, the money to pay for them,
and were blessed with some talented individuals whose technological expertise
enables us to keep on celebrating.
By faith, small groups, committees, faith formation for youth, some rental clients
were still able to meet either in the building or online.
The lockdown and suspension of some services occasioned by pandemic restrictions
put some strain on stewarding the resources we use to sustain our ministry and mission.
By faith, we continue to invite good and sufficient stewardship
of our financial and other resources, and will seek to discern how to manage any shortfalls.

That's a condensed I-pad kind of view of our church life.
On the larger video and audio screen, how have we seen faith active in our own lives?
in the life of the community and world around us?
How has faith enabled each of us to bear our griefs, carry our sorrows,
live and work differently and yet caringly, supportively, and as healthfully as we might?
And, through active faith, have we learned? have been able to grow in spirit?
In a few moments, I will invite each of us into some silent reflection time about that.
But first, I asked Margaret Leask to share some of her insights in that regard,
so let's listen to her witness

Now, take some time to begin to reflect, note, and give thanks to God
as you ponder these questions:

*In what ways has an active faith helped you through the stressors you have experienced
during these months and months of pandemic?*

What new learnings have come to you as a person of faith during such a time?

CONCLUSION

Truly, living through months of global pandemic, has been, continues to be a time for faith.
Faith that remains active in deeds and prayers and contemplation.
Faith that finds expression in caring inter-relational ways, and through patience and persistence.
Faith that seems to be at the core of who we are at First United, Waterloo. Do you think?

Faith that continues to trust and make evident that in, in spite of, and behind the scenes of this ongoing global pandemic, God is with us, keeping faith with us, and still also at work making all things new. Faith for a time such as this is a faith that dares to imagine and foster such life anew. Faith for a time such as this finds us active and engaged as people of hope over against all the lingering fears, anxieties, uncertainties, and despair that also permeate the global air along with dreaded molecules of infection. Earlier on as this virus wrapped its tentacles around the world, American Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann called attention to the biblical underpinnings and theological warrants for sustaining active faith in such a time. Here are some of his inviting and evocative words for our ministry as people of faith: The first task, he writes, *“is to engage in **relentless, uncompromising hope** ... the conviction that God will not quit until God has arrived at God’s good intention... That holy purpose is tenacious, steadfast, and relentless, that we and all of God’s creation will come to well-being.”* ¹ Remaining confident this divine resolve he names a companion action: *“... the second task of ministry is the work in the meantime to be **witnesses to the abiding [steadfast love, or what he calls] tenacious solidarity of God that persists amid pestilence. That witness is performed by both word (at which we are pretty good!) and by act.”*** ¹ Faith and works. Works and faith. They go together hand in glove. Yes, let us as people of faith, keeping living out our faith in action for truly, given the ongoing current situation of life in our world, it is timely, absolutely needful, and intent on being transformational.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Virus As a Summons to Faith*, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR: 2020), pages 31 and 32.