

SERMON: “Inclusion”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, May 22, 2022

PRAYER: “Spirit of the Risen Christ fall afresh on us. Help us to continue to discern and learn what it is to be welcoming, accepting, and affirming of others. Strengthen and nurture us in our abilities to build relationships and live your transforming love.” Amen

Eighty-five years ago, may seem like ancient history, but it’s only about four generations back. At that time, in Grand Bend, Ontario, where I currently reside there was a popular dance hall. It was called the Lakeview Casino. Gambling didn’t happen there, but hundreds of people -- couples and singles -- came to dance, and listen to big band music. There was also a sign posted at the entrance to that dance hall, a sign that was duplicated in one of Grand Bend’s subdivisions: “No Jews Allowed”. During the 1950s and early 60s, during my growing up years, my family made a number of visits to the great uncle Fred and great aunt Jessie. They lived in Detroit, Michigan. They were lovely people in many ways; at times, eccentric. But their animosity towards Afro-Americans was spleenful. It was frightfully disturbing to me as a young boy to encounter hatred up close. Recent events in America, in Buffalo, New York, the city of “caring neighbours” have highlighted the ongoing existence of racism in all its ugliness. Our own nation is not squeaky clean despite our reputation for being nice: our indigenous peoples still yearn for respectful relationships and reconciliation. Most recently, we have witnessed new dividing walls erected between some who support universal Covid-19 vaccination and those who don’t. Seems that, as human beings, we are not yet very good at disentangling ourselves from protection of privilege, self-centred individualism, and prejudice, nor overcoming them. Some form of supra-human power is called for. The good news is: it’s available. Some of us know about it. Some of us know some ways and means and a place where true community can happen; or, at least, where we endeavour to help it happen.

I INFANT CHRISTIANITY

In its infancy, early Christianity was an outgrowth of Judaism. The earliest congregations in Palestine were Jewish Christian ones. And, across the entrance to their circles there was an unwritten yet implicit sign: “No Gentiles Allowed”. Not unless they were willing to swear allegiance to the Laws of Moses, and all male heads of households and males 13 years of age and up would accept circumcision. Yet, on the day the church of Christ was born, the disciples were empowered by the Spirit to teach and live the gospel of Jesus in ways that would bear fruit in all the corners of the earth. All of them were given power to share the good news of God and Jesus in a variety of languages other than Hebrew and Aramaic. That’s another implicit sign that reads: “God’s Holy Spirit Will Not Be Blocked”.

Not by policies and procedures or rules and regulations nor by narrow-view understandings, nor by any acculturated prejudices of human devising.

And that's how the real story unfolds according to the Book of Acts.

Thousands of both Jews and proselytes begin to form house churches in Jerusalem.

Philip undertakes a successful mission venture in Samaria. Church communities form there.

Philip also goes one on one for Jesus with an Ethiopian eunuch a representative of a foreign nation who may also perhaps be the first black-African convert.

And Saul, a persecutor of the new Jesus movement, becomes radically converted.

He changes his name to Paul and undertakes a massive evangelistic mission to the Gentiles, without which there would be no Christian church today because Jewish-Christianity fizzled out.

Acts 15 offers a synopsis report on the first General Council of the Christian Church.

Convened in Jerusalem, the hot ticket item: a motion to require circumcision for Gentile males.

Paul's sincere and impassioned speech to vote against that motion won the day.

It was aided and abetted by none other than the disciple Peter.

And the back story on that, which is also in the Book of Acts, is fascinating.

Peter is in the midst of an evangelical mission in Lydda and Joppa, coastal cities in Palestine.

One night, while sleeping on a rooftop, he has the weirdest of dreams.

Come morning, Peter is invited to meet with Cornelius, and officer of the Roman army!

Meeting with the enemy, Cornelius asks Peter to baptize him and his whole household. Done!

Peter returns to the headquarter church in Jerusalem and reports his success.

Most of the other leaders there are shocked. "How could you do that?"

"How could you go ahead with baptism for them without requiring male circumcision?"

That wasn't really the really big issue.

The really big issue was: Peter sat at Cornelius' table and shared a meal with all in the house.

How dare he! Totally, absolutely unkosher!

"I once thought so too," Peter replied, "but, let me share my dream with you:

"I had a vision while I was praying in the city of Joppa.

I saw something like a bedsheet dropping down from heaven right before me.

I looked closely inside and saw domesticated and wild animals, reptiles, and wild birds.

And then, I heard a voice saying, 'Peter, get up and kill and eat!' But I protested:

'Holy God, you can't be serious! No ritually unclean, defiled food has ever entered my mouth!'

And the voice spoke to me again, three times in succession:

'Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared as clean'."

So, when that delegation arrived inviting me to visit Cornelius in his house, it was clear to me what I was to do.

In the early years of the formation of the Christian church, fence after fence, barrier after barrier falls down and disintegrates.

Sometime the mid-50s of 60s, Paul can write to congregations in Colossae:

"There is no longer any distinction between Gentiles and Jews, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarians, savages, slaves, and free people." (Col. 3:11)

Right from the outset, the church is to be about inclusion, inclusion, inclusion, about overcoming every boundary and human prejudice that gets in God's way. It's all about building bridges and living God's transforming love so that God's commonwealth of harmonious community for all and for all creation happens.

II TODAY'S CHURCH

Both Paul and Cornelius underwent a radical conversion experience. And God's Spirit is yet active and busy bringing people to Jesus outside today's church, or validating those who have a different, but just as powerful, meaningful experience of God. And that same Spirit is also busy getting people inside the church to be receptive, active, and discerning as to how they build relationships with and validate unchurched persons and persons of other faith traditions. And those kinds of conversations that matter can be deeply and wonderfully rich. And, truly, when new folks do come to our congregations it is wonderful and exciting. A lot of them are folks just like us. And some may be younger than many of us. But, what about folks who are unlike us? Many congregations have promoted and acted on "Bring-a-Friend-to-Church" Sundays. Can we imagine? What might happen if we ventured into: "Bring-a-Stranger" Sunday? Or "Bring-Somebody-You're-Not-Fussy-About-or-Even-Prejudiced-Against" Sunday?

A struggling North Carolina congregation got a denominational church growth kit some years ago and launched an evangelistic initiative. Teams of laypersons were prepared to embark on an invitational door-to-door endeavour. The teams went out with enthusiasm and handfuls of pamphlets about their congregation, their denomination, and video clips of their smiling, accessible pastor. Each team was given a map for the neighbourhood district that was assigned to them. Helen and Gladys had a map that told them: "Go down Summit Drive and turn right." Before they headed out, their team leader emphasized in Bodoni Bold: **"Turn right!"** Helen and Gladys, who were both retired school teachers in their eighties, were still much better at giving instructions than they were in receiving them. They went out. They arrived at Summit Drive. And ... they turned left. And there they were, right in the middle of the housing projects. Oh my! They had gone off evangelizing "wrong" people, in the "wrong" neighbourhood. As the teams returned to the church to report on their Sunday afternoon junket, Gladys and Helen were honest in saying that they didn't do very well. Only one person showed any interest, a woman named Verleen. Verleen lived in the projects with her two children in a one-room apartment. Verleen had never been to church in her life, but felt she might like to visit theirs. Well, that's what you get for not following the pastor's and key leaders' instructions, you wind up with a woman from the projects named Verleen.

The next Sunday, Verleen and her two children came to worship. She actually liked it so well she said she'd like to come to Women's Bible Study. So, on Thursday morning, Helen and Gladys went and picked her up. And Verleen came into that Bible Study clutching her new Bible, the first one she had ever owned because Gladys' and Helen's women's circle gave it to her. The passage for reflection that morning was Luke 4:1-13: Jesus' Temptation. The pastor asked: *"Have any of you been faced with temptation and, with Jesus' help, been able to resist?"* One participant recalled an incident of confusion at the supermarket checkout the previous week. Out in the parking lot, she discovered she was holding a loaf of bread that she hadn't paid for. *"Well, why should she?"* she thought to herself. *"That supermarket has lots of money."* But then, some angel of conscience poked her to remember that she was a Christian. She went back into the store and paid for the bread. The pastor nodded approval. *"A couple of years ago, I was into cocaine really big. You know what that's like!"* Verleen had jumped right in with her story. *"You know that stuff makes you crazy. Well, anyway, my boyfriend, not the one I've got now, but the one who was the Daddy of my first child, that one, well, we knocked over a gas station one night – got two hundred dollars from it. It was as simple as taking candy from a baby. Well, my boyfriend, he says to me, 'Let's knock off that 7-11 down on the corner'. And something in me, it says, 'No, I've held up that gas station with you, but I ain't going to help hold up no convenience store'. He beat the hell out of me; but I still said, 'No!' It felt great to say, 'No!', 'cause that's the only time in my life I said 'No' to anything. Made me feel like I was somebody."* The church parlour was filled with stunned silence. The pastor muttered, *"Well, that sure is resisting temptation, just like in the text. Now, it's time for our closing prayer."* The group filtered out and the pastor wound up helping Helen into her Plymouth. She said to him, *"You know, I can't wait to get home and get on the phone to invite people to come next Thursday. Your Bible studies used to be dull. But I think we can get a good crowd for this!"* I And my heartfelt hunch is, that, at that moment, the Holy Spirit was grinning from ear to ear.

CONCLUSION

So, hey, First United Church, Waterloo, United Church of Canada congregations elsewhere. How are we living the gospel entrusted to us? What has the Holy Spirit been up to among us lately? Are we holding to our expressed Core Values and Mission Statement? Is there any process of conversion or reformation of conscience happening? That Holy Spirit is still at large being playful and prodding. Not particularly fussy about rules, regulations, policies and procedures and such. Even more inimical towards unwritten signs and barriers like prejudiced attitudes, behaviours; out instead to expose them, smash them down or melt them away.

How many more conversions are we open to: in the language we use, in ways we interact, in our living God's transforming love in ways that truly accept and value others?

Might we venture something like "Bring-A-Stranger-to-Church" Sunday?

Or maybe, come up with even better ways of conversing with and building relationships with people not like us, people who follow other paths of faith, people we label 'unchurched'. Inclusion, inclusion, inclusion.

Church is one place in this world where God's dream of healthful, wholesome, harmonious, and heartfelt acceptance of human diversity might and can actually happen.

Come, Holy Spirit, we still have some shedding, some work, some shifts to undergo

God being our Helper. Jesus, the Christ, being our Light. The Holy Spirit, our Transformer.

1 William Willimon, *The Intrusive Word*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI: 1994), pages 1-3