

SERMON: “A New Sense of Community”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, May 29, 2022

PRAYER: “Spirit of God, Mother of our spirits, we rejoice in your liberating love. Strengthen us in body and spirit. Surround us in God’s mercy and grace. Teach us your truth this day and lead us into all God’s truth, we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen

Around 1988 years ago, there was a hallmark birthday.

It was the birthday of a faith community initially called “The Way”.

The founders and charter members of that movement became midwives of the Christian church.

Some of them were born-ins. Some of them were found-ins.

And many others were freshly recruited through intentional words of witness or acts of kindness.

Today, we remain part of that continuing movement. Today we still celebrate:

“Happy Birthday, Church!”

As we celebrate, I invite us to remember that those very first communities of followers of Jesus, in the midst of their social world, sought to develop a new sense and form of community.

I ORIGINS

The world in which they lived was a rather rigid, closed world of categories and stratifications:

Rich or poor; free or slave; Gentile or Jew.

Male dominance, female submissiveness; adults with power, children without power.

Exploiters and the exploited. Friends and enemies. For some, ritually clean and ritually unclean.

There were chains of command, pecking orders, lots of authoritarian structures.

There was little or no movement possible between categories.

It was a tower or pyramid-like, static social world that seemed as enduring and fixed as rock.

Strength, security, order were reinforced by might. It was as impressive as it was oppressive.

It was a domination system. We name it hierarchy.

The world into which Jesus invited his followers was more fluid, more open.

It was to be organized and navigated in supportive, caring, liberated relationships.

Rich and poor, slave and free, Gentile and Jew, male and female, adults and children

living co-operatively and justly, valuing one another, sharing goods and services.

Exploitation disintegrated to be replaced by solidarity and inter-human harmony.

Enemies were persons waiting to be converted into friends,

or persons one met with the resistance and resilience of non-violence and love.

From the get-go, everyone was considered unclean, flawed, often wayward;

but also, everyone was considered open for purification, capable of saintliness and righteousness.

Something about Jesus’ sacrificial death on a cross made that transformation possible, effective.

It was to be a dynamic world of adaptations, fluctuations, and inter-connectivity like a coral reef.

A kind of water world or aquaculture, if you like.

And, the sign of belonging was ritualized in water, the water of baptism.

Water is always Rock’s worst nightmare.

Let's assemble a collage of those people who comprised those first Christian communities.
Many of them experienced relocation and new vocation.
Birthplaces, previous careers, sometimes family members were left behind.
Even greater were the mental, emotional, and spiritual transitions.
One had to figure out how to relate to people once believed to be better or worse than oneself.
One had to learn how to relate to people who were obviously different:
who spoke a different language, who had different education,
who had varying abilities and disabilities, whose level of income differed,
who had experienced either a lot of privilege or the yoke of slavery.
It meant learning how to relate to others in their best interests
rather than feeding and protecting one's own best interest.
It meant finding the nerve and stamina to challenge and withstand
all the domineering stratagems, protocols, and seductions of Empire.

II LONG-LIVED CONTINUITY

It worked. Empires have come and gone and continue to wax and wane. The Church is still here.
Barely, some might say. Seriously fragmented, often over-extended; but, still here.
That may be because she is least effective when she becomes a closed community.
Churches that remain open, fluid, adaptive, in process like a wave, a movement
are communities that offer welcoming, supportive, alternative worlds.
Churches seek to be communities of faith energized by the same breathy, creative Spirit
that brought the church into being on the Day of Pentecost.
That Spirit remains busy keeping us connected to God,
the God we get to meet and have interpreted to us in and through Jesus.
That same Spirit moves like a vitalizing wind and purifying fire in our midst
gifting us for ministry and the outreach endeavours in which we get to share.
We get to benefit from and participate in this sense and form of community
that is either unlike, or runs much deeper than, other forms of community
in which we also live, move, play, contribute, and have our being.

Some years ago, Reader's Digest included this cameo story
from Derek Tingle, an American factory worker.

*"While supervising the production line of the bottling plant where I was fore-person,
I noticed that the capping machine was out of caps.*

*Unfortunately, in attempting to rectify the problem, I was careless
and the machine cut off part of one of my fingers.*

The senior operator, noticing what had happened, fainted;

A second operator rushed to the scene. She too fainted.

A third operator found a bottle of aspirin and followed me toward the first aid station.

A fourth operator took a cup of water from the cooler, and she, too, followed.

The rear was brought up by the first-aid worker with a bandage.

*A police car arrived and took me to a hospital.
The operation was minor and, in less than two hours, I was being driven home by my wife.
She dropped me off at work so I could assure my friends that all was well.
But, I need not have bothered. The others had all gone home sick."*

In healthful, wholesome church communities, when anyone is sick or in pain, instead of everyone going their separate ways, we enact collective ways of sharing hurt. Likewise, when anyone among us is honoured, we rejoice and celebrate together. And, should our life situation be such as to weaken our faith and riddle us with doubt, while we are numb or disturbed, our faith community keeps on believing for us. In a helpful book about congregational life, Evelyn and James Whitehead wrote: *"As a gift, my community fills out the narrowness of my own vision, welcomes my strengths and special insights, and makes up for my limitations."* I Such is the water we swim in when the water of our faith community is fine.

Others around us are yet thirsting for such water. Listen to this testimony of someone who was welcomed into and nurtured by a congregation. *"I was convinced Christians worshipped a stuffy Grandfather in the sky whose chief joy was saying, 'Thou shalt not', to just about anything that was fun ... Over the years, I began to realize I was operating with ideas about the church that had gone out with whalebone corsets. Since I had hardly ever gone to church as a child, I had little first-hand experience to go on. Hidden back in my childhood memory were feelings of anger at a church that wanted Dad to stand up and make a public confession because he had grown a mustache. I also remember an evangelist coming to town. I must have been very small, but I can remember being afraid because he just kept yelling and shouting. I came into the United Church as an adult without any real church background. Within a year, I found myself an 'elder'. I was often terribly confused. Things everybody else seemed to know, I didn't. And, I was embarrassed to ask. Since then, I've found that many who join the church as adults are in the same situation I also saw that many of the people I had worked with in radio and TV stations over the previous twenty years were lonely, cynical, and looking for meaning in life. They needed what the church had to offer, but were refusing to give it a try because of their kindergarten understanding about what the church is.*

I ached for them. So many, especially the high-profile on-air personalities were terribly lonely people with many acquaintances but no real friends. So often, they were really hungering for the personal support and meaning that a Christian faith, as expressed in the United Church, could give.

But they often rejected it on the basis of something they vaguely remembered from long ago, or because they thought the high-pressure TV evangelistic programs represented all denominations.

In the church, I found two things, and I have no idea which came first. I found some people willing to get close enough to like me even when my warts were showing> More importantly, I encountered a God in the flesh-and-blood person of Jesus, the Christ, who also knew the warts that weren't showing, and loved me anyway. There were no shattering 'born-again' experiences. Changes happened slowly over several years but they happened. And, from a sense of aimlessness and frustration, I found a sense of knowing what life was about, and what I could do with mine. In other words, I found myself part of a special community called 'the church' Living in that community, I experienced (which is different from learning or understanding) the truth that God loves us first, and calls us to live in response to that loving."

CONCLUSION

This United Church of ours seeks to be a welcoming, fluid, inclusive community. Some congregations like First United, Waterloo, have taken the leap of faith to declare themselves to be an Affirming congregation and live into what that means. It is about being open to, accepting of, and valuing anyone regardless of age, class, race, ethnic background, sexual orientation, gender expression or gender identity; anyone regardless of the varying spectrum of physical or mental ability. Let us hope and pray that this community of faith, or her successors, might remain open to any who may come hungering and thirsting for meaning in life. Let us keep on affirming that "We are not alone. We live in God's world"; God's wondrous, captivating world of multiple inter-connections and relationships caught up in the evolution of all creation into wholeness and fullness of life. Around 1988 years ago, the Christian church came into being. 13 days and three years from now, the United Church of Canada will be 100 years old. Happy Birthday, Church! Stay flexible. Stay fluid. Stay open, welcoming, accepting, and affirming. Share and live God's transforming love. Offer support. Give meaning and purpose to life. Touch holiness. Sustain all human-divine-and creation connections. May your old people yet see visions and your young people dream dreams. May God's message be proclaimed by the Spirit still outpouring on God's people. May the Spirit in your midst keep blowing. May God's love from your centre keep flowing. May that special sense of community you endeavour to embody keep showing. Glory, honour, praise, and thanksgiving be to God, who by Christ and through the Spirit enables it to happen.

Notes

1 Evelyn and James Whitehead, Community of Faith: Crafting Christian Communities Today, (iUniverse Inc., Bloomington, ID: 2001), page 85.