

Sermon: May 7, 2017 – Acts 2: 42-47 (and Deuteronomy 15)
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Have you ever been a pioneer?

This could take many forms: starting a new business, launching a non-profit society, being a charter member of an organization, being the first in your family or neighbourhood to attain a post-secondary degree, stepping away from a legacy of addiction or abuse.

Whatever form your pioneering takes, there are some things you can expect:

Being a pioneer is risky. Sometimes there is financial risk involved, almost always there is social risk involved. To do pioneer work you must step away from something established – like a steady paycheque - and, most likely, will also need to step away from your old community, who are used to things being the way they've always been.

Pioneer work requires long hours, hard work, and humility. Any of you who have been part of a new church development congregation will be able to attest to this: the constant fundraising, setting up chairs and taking down chairs (and setting up chairs and taking down chairs, and setting up chairs and taking down chairs), meeting new people all the time but also saying a lot of goodbyes: to those who move, those who didn't quite catch the spark, and those who are totally burnt out.

And being a pioneer forces you to keep your focus on your mission, and not get distracted by everything else. In spite of all the details that someone must attend to, what Steven Covey said is true: "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing" or as countless baseball coaches are saying at this very moment, "keep your eye on the ball." Whether your mission is building custom cabinets in Canmore or running a mission hospital in Africa, you need to be skilled at what you do, oriented towards the needs of your clients, and both creative and resilient as you keep moving toward your horizon line.

Today's reading from the book of Acts is about the pioneers of the Christian faith. Before talking about their pioneer spirit in more detail, let's hear the reading once more, this time from "The Voice" Bible Translation:

⁴² The community continually committed themselves to learning what the apostles taught them, gathering for fellowship, breaking bread, and praying. ⁴³ Everyone felt a sense of awe because the apostles were doing many signs and wonders among them. ⁴⁴ There was an intense sense of togetherness among all who believed; they shared all their material possessions in trust. ⁴⁵ They sold any possessions and goods that did not benefit the community and used the money to help everyone in need. ⁴⁶ They were unified as they worshiped at the temple day after day. In homes, they broke bread and shared meals with glad and generous hearts. ⁴⁷ The new disciples praised God, and they enjoyed the goodwill of all the people of the city. Day after day the Lord added to their number everyone who was experiencing liberation.

Taking the same categories about being a pioneer that were used earlier, let's enter into this world a bit more.

PIONEERING INVOLVES RISK: Making the move to formally be baptized into Christ had its risks. The harsher risks, of Christians being systematically persecuted by Rome, were still several years off, but I suspect that leaving behind your established way of life to undertake something as radical as this communal lifestyle outlined in the book of Acts, would have left some families in tatters.

And then there were the financial risks: in this community of faith, anything you had that would be of use to the community, was used by the community; anything beyond that, got turned into cash, so that the needy could be supported. Our reading from Acts portrays an energetic, joyous community but still: selling ALL your stuff? That was a tall order, and if for some reason the whole venture collapsed, then where would you be??

PIONEERING REQUIRES LONG HOURS, HARD WORK, HUMILITY: This scripture lesson is *filled* with verbs: learning, gathering, breaking bread, praying, performing signs and wonders, selling goods and sharing the proceeds, believing and worshipping and praising. All these action words indicate energy and vitality and momentum. But what strikes me most, in this earliest expression of Christianity, is the twenty-four-hour rhythm they had of worship and work. They healed, they preached, they shared communion, and they gave thanks to God. They lived out Jesus' parables about the rich being brought low – in this case, voluntarily – and the poor lifted up. Without the God-connection all they had was a technique; the actual fuel that ran this engine was the grace of God, encountered in prayer. They had their share of conflict to deal with, too – with some pretty dramatic results, if you read on a few chapters in Acts.

PIONEERS NEED TO STAY FOCUSED ON MISSION. In reading this account from Acts, it doesn't sound as though there was much room to NOT focus on their Mission. Building on established traditions, like the Jewish system of forgiving debts and letting land lay fallow every seven years, which we heard about this morning, and the teachings of Jesus about radical, non-negotiable love, these believers understood the connection between sharing everything you have with the poor and the poor in spirit, and bringing glory to God. In an amazing, missional display of non-

attachment to worldly goods, this community of faith could truly welcome others to be set free from the things in their lives that kept them apart from the God of Love.

So we have the general idea of pioneering, and this profile of pioneer first-century Christianity, ... but what about us? That first community was a long time ago and, admittedly, the book of Acts paints a pretty idyllic portrayal of their life together. And beyond that, how does all of this connect for those who don't see themselves as pioneers, who enjoy the benefits of things being settled or traditional? Let's hear the scripture one more time, this time from the Common English Bible, before engaging this question.

⁴² The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. ⁴³ A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were united and shared everything. ⁴⁵ They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. ⁴⁶ Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. ⁴⁷ They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

It is my belief that each generation of Christians, especially in the fast-changing world we live in, are called to be pioneers of the faith, whether we are naturally inclined to "pioneer work" or not. The active, powerful love of God that inspired the early Church is still the heartbeat of who we are and what we do, but the forms and expectations of Church life have to be set aside to make room for the Holy Spirit to do something new in the world.

If we are to be pioneers, what are the risks we are called to?

As a denomination, the United Church of Canada is property rich and program poor, with countless gigantic sanctuaries built 100+ years ago, and huge, optimistic Christian Education buildings added 60 years ago. We also have bulky administrative structures, which were appropriate to their time but not now. Among many risks we are being called to take is to start unlocking the capital tied up in redundant buildings, and all the bequests given to support those big buildings, in order to fund programs to engage the needs of our neighbours and learn of their vision for the future. We also, fortunately, are on a path of trimming our structures, though I am disappointed that the deconstruction is much less bold than what was initially proposed.

Here, in this wonderful little building, I think the risks we need to take are very different; namely, the risks of upsetting something that's going pretty well as it is. Last year we celebrated the faithful history of this congregation as it weathered 125 years of ups and downs of this community, fully aware that everything we do today owes a debt to their hard work and sacrifice. As has been said many times over the ages, by Sir Isaac Newton and others, the reason we can see as far as we can, is that we stand on the shoulders of giants. Without the hard work of our forebears in the lean years, the things we do today would be impossible.

But it is time to upset the applecart. It is time for us to go beyond saying, "of course, LGBTQ folks would be welcome here because everyone is" and make a more public statement, affirming our belief that Christ is offended when people are excluded and reviled in his name. It is time for us to look at ways that our beautiful worship space makes it difficult for the very young and, in some cases, the very old to feel comfortable. It is time for us to embrace even more fully our Wednesday night Evensong service, a spiritual asset so grounded in the moment that it reaches far into the future. It scares me silly to even hint at changing what we have now because I love what God has blessed us with exactly as it is, but that's the precise risk that the first Christians had to take: changing for the sake of Christ's dynamic, out-reaching love.

What about the long hours, hard work and humility that are required by pioneer work? No complaints on this front, I would say: you are an engaged group, providing strong and visionary leadership while at the same time, being unafraid to pick up a broom or mop and get at 'er. You rise to the challenge time and time again. But if I could lift up one specific bit of work that I'd like to see expanded here at Ralph Connor, it's the invitation we heard in last week's Minute for Stewardship, for you to think about an experience in your life that has been life-changing, and be willing to share that with our Children's Church. I so appreciate the work of Joan and Faye, and Melanie before them, and everyone who has assisted with this Ministry, and even as I offer these thanks I look out at a phenomenal group of people whose stories of faith could be game-changers for our children. Just imagine what it would say to have our Children's Church that fully integrated into who we are and what we believe. And for those of you who simply cannot engage this ministry in this way, well, we need your prayers.

And finally, pioneer work only succeeds when it is true to its mission— when it keeps the main thing, the main thing. I deeply respect the Mission Statement that was done here at Ralph Connor a few years back, which you will now see on screen:

[Ralph Connor Memorial United Church's Mission as a Church Community is:]

- * to nurture the spiritual exploration and growth of all our members and adherents;
- * to be an intentionally inviting Christian community that seeks, welcomes and embraces new members;

* to reach out and become an agent for social justice in our neighbourhood and in the global community.

To me, these words reflect who we are and what Christ calls us to be, and is a statement that gets referred to on a regular basis as decisions are made about program and budget and communications. It's a statement that calls us to be people of faith AND action, who explore and learn and grow in spirit even as we engage in the most practical acts of kindness. Today's prayers of the people, will be built around what you have said in this statement, and I thank you: both for the wisdom of these words, and for your commitment to living them.

/// On this day, of all days, we celebrate new beginnings, new commitments, new hopes, within a tradition that reaches back two thousand years. The waters of baptism, waters intermingled from the Bow River and the River Jordan, connect us with the here and now as well as the then and there. The laying on of hands at adult baptism link us with those whose hands were on our shoulders when we were confirmed, reaching back to the book of Acts. As we immerse ourselves in these great traditions, we are enlivened by the Holy Spirit to be about Christ's amazing mission in our time and place. Remembering THE pioneers in the faith, we embrace OUR pioneer work with energy and fidelity... and no small amount of trepidation. Thanks be to God for all of this. Amen.

References cited:

Covey, Steven. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kevinkruse/2012/07/16/the-7-habits/#680db7ca39c6>

Newton, Isaac. "Letter from Sir Isaac Newton to Robert Hooke". Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Cited in Wikipedia, 2016.

And for further reading on the 2nd chapter of Acts,

Pumpkin Cottage. <http://www.lectionarystudies.com/studyot/easter1aeot.html>

Sadler, Rodney S. Jr. <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=19>

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