

Sermon: Sunday, July 7, 2019 – Luke 10: 1-11, 16-17
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

One of the things I hear all the time, is people telling me that the place they really meet God, is in nature. For those of us who choose to live in this amazing, outdoorsy place, and for those who come here on holidays, this makes absolute sense. The beauty and diversity of these surroundings, from the intricacy of tiny things to the immensity of the mountains, is nothing short of inspirational.

So this first statement, about seeing God in nature, is not problematic in the least. It connects to the very first words of our Judaeo-Christian story, with God at the centre of the origins of the world, declaring all of it to be good. It also draws in to indigenous understandings of the world around us, with the Creator of all at the centre of the holy web of All My Relations.

The problem comes, not with the proclamation that “Where I meet God is in nature,” but with the next sentence that almost always follows: “so I don’t see any need to be part of a Church.” These aren’t always the exact words, but you know what I’m talking about.

Today’s reading from the 10th chapter of Luke, the sending out of some six dozen disciples, can help us see the connection between the work of Christian discipleship, and an understanding of God, our Creator, our companion, our connection. The Franciscan Priest and Contemplative, Fr. Richard Rohr, writes “Once we know that the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, safe, enchanted, offering grace to any who look deeply. The essential function of religion is to radically connect us with everything....to help us see the world and ourselves in wholeness, and not just in parts.” (Rohr, pp.6-7)

To an extent, I think that’s how Jesus saw the mission that he and his disciples were about. Jesus was sending the disciples out to help people recognize that the goodness of God was already inside them, thus re-shaping the way they related to their neighbours and all the world around them. Quoting again from Richard Rohr, “The point of the Christian life is not to distinguish oneself from the ungodly, but to stand in radical solidarity with everyone and everything else. This is the full, final, and intended effect of the Incarnation – symbolized by its finality in the cross, which is God’s great act of solidarity....” (Rohr, p. 33) Jesus sends his disciples into the world as an act of love, to help people clear their eyes and unplug their ears and open their hearts to the very heartbeat of God.

Holding that very love of God in his heart, Jesus – understanding his mission as one that needs participants more than spectators - sent his followers out in waves, to help spread the good news. The first wave, detailed one chapter earlier in Luke (ch.9), was when Jesus sent his twelve disciples into the communities around Galilee. Traditionally, we understand Jesus and all of these twelve disciples to be local Galileans: Jesus was from the high country town of Nazareth, Peter was from the shoreline town of Capernaum, and so on. Their first mission, was to help their local communities and that was easier said than done.

For a variety of reasons, Jesus himself had a tough time in the region of Galilee. He barely escaped with his life when he tried preaching at the synagogue in Nazareth, where he would have studied and worshipped since childhood. But rather than being thwarted by the anger of his neighbours and even his relatives, Jesus looked at the assets at hand and said to the 12 disciples, “you go into these towns and villages, and do the things I would do. Tell them about the heart of God, which reaches out to them in their woundedness. Bring my healing intention to them, and make them whole. And let them look after you: trust them so much that you don’t even bring along an extra shirt, or pocket money.” (Luke 9: 1-5) Jesus, recognizing that not everybody is drawn to one approach or one personality type, sends out this motley crew of twelve in pairs, into the nearby towns and villages with the power to do everything that he would have done. He doesn’t just sit back with his feet up while they were doing this, but now there were thirteen of them doing the work that used to be mostly done by Jesus alone.

It would have been so easy for Jesus to be stymied at this point, or to double-down on his effort and say, “nobody else can do this, I’ve got to do it myself.” But that isn’t what he did. He knew his disciples had their limitations but he also knew that they were totally with him. So Jesus entrusted his message to his companions – as he does with us in our time and place - so that they could BE his love for the people of Galilee. Now, he did also give them the power to discern when they were wasting their time, to adjudge those places where the people were so locked in to their old ways that the message of love would get no

traction at all, and to “shake the dust off their sandals” at those towns. (Luke 9:5). His disciples would do their best to find hearts that were open to the good news but if someone simply refused to open themselves to it, well, that was their choice to make.

Having sent out the twelve – and receiving back reasonable reports of success – Jesus sends out a bigger group. Depending on which manuscript one is reading from it’s hard to tell whether it was 70 or 72 that got sent out this time, so let’s just acknowledge for now that the second group was about six times larger than the first. Bible scholar Robert Tannehill reminds me that this second set of seventy-odd missionaries, again sent two-by-two, were not sent to do the exact same task as the first group of twelve. This was not just a second go at the same task.

In the 9th chapter of Luke, the first disciples stayed close to home, visiting only the Jewish towns in Galilee. But by the 10th chapter of Luke, in the reading we heard this morning, Jesus was moving the mission along, heading toward Jerusalem. They are moving into less familiar territory, and this group was to be more an advance party going ahead of Jesus, than a replacement party going instead of Jesus. This group was to be broader in its approach, going to all communities, not just the Jewish towns, proclaiming a new realm, where God’s inclusive love would be known by all.

This second set of missionaries, then, moved outwards, from the more familiar toward the less familiar. They went, as part of a dynamic mission, a ministry that was literally “on the move” from Galilee to Jerusalem and this time, Jesus himself would follow them to town, utilizing the groundwork his disciples had done before him. At no point does Luke say that one of these missions was better or more important than the other, but rather portrays them as two different aspects of Christ’s ministry: one closer to home, one further afield.

When I compare these two missions, one smaller and closer to home, one larger and moving into unknown territory, it speaks to me of the way that Church life works in our time and place. Some parts of what we do are closer to home, more focused on the needs of the congregation and the group that gathers here for worship. Other parts of what we do may be in another part of the world, through our Mission & Service givings, or may be local but so different from typical Church work that we may not think of it as a response to the call of Jesus, even though that is exactly what’s behind it. And this two-pronged activity in response to Christ’s call, some in-close, some further-out work, reminds me of a memorable educational event from 25 years ago.

The presenter was a sparky “old hand” named Rev. Dr. Hilbert Berger. Hilbert loved to stir things up, finding out what would irritate his audience the most and then going hard after that. His assertion was that that Church life has a rhythm to it. What we do on Sundays, equips people to bring the love of Christ out into the world. As Dr. Berger drew the model, home base was a place of great energy buildup, circling around the Word of God and community connections and then being released, energized, exploding out into the world with all that energy. (While it wasn’t a metaphor he used, picture a discus thrower, building power then releasing the energy all at once).

So the home base, is where we tend to one another’s cares and hurts and needs but it’s also where the energy gets built up, and then as we do Christ’s work out there – in our jobs, in our volunteer efforts, in the way we treat one another – we expend so much of that energy that we can be pretty spent at the end of the week. And rather than just unplugging, and recuperating, and hoping for the best, or attempting to build back up all on our own, what we do is come back together, to get re-energized. We get re-energized by the good news of Jesus Christ, by the power of community, by singing and praying to the God who gives us life in a spirit of reliance and gratitude. And that re-energizes us, to go out there and do it all again.

Lest we think that this is just a model that some pastor drew up, remember Jesus and his inner circle of disciples. Together, they shared their joys and woes, their confidence and their fear, and then were sent by Jesus to bring his reconciling love to the world. They start close to home where there is both familiarity and resistance, then they go far afield into populations where they have no experience. In going near and then going far, in going out into the world, and coming back to be with Jesus, they lived that rhythm that Hilbert Berger described of going out to demonstrate Christ’s love for all, and coming home to be re-centered and re-energized.

And this, to me speaks to that statement I put before us at the start of today's message. Yes, we can meet God in nature but until that truly activates something, it doesn't do much good for anyone other than just me. When we come together, in the presence of that same beautiful God we experience on the mountain trails, we hear the ancient stories of how God has continued to show up in all manner of circumstances...and we grow trust between one another... and we re-commit ourselves to doing the hard work of being the hands and feet and voice of Christ in the world, expressing love and justice and fairness in a world that often rewards the exact opposite. We work with Christ to bring love into the world, and then we come back, to support one another, to love one another, to encourage one another. Hilbert Berger's model understands that just doing this stuff here (the home base work) really doesn't amount to much unless it leads to something out there (the mission work in the world), but it also reminds us that if you're just doing and doing and doing out there with no replenishment and no community to support you when your resources get low, then the well is eventually going to run dry. For God's love in the universe to really get unlocked, we need both a place of support, grounded in the love of Christ, and a place of action.

Experience has told me that in Church life, as in life in general, sometimes there is a lot more going on here (home base) than here (mission); other times, things are so busy and chaotic out here (mission) that we can hardly stop to get replenished back here (home base). And while I don't know that he had any empirical research to back it up, Dr. Berger said that a healthy balance for a Church, is about 70/30. If about 70% of our time and effort goes into community outreach, and about 30% goes into the in-house programs to help energize the other 70%, then the balance is about right. And just to be clear, this isn't just "Church programs" he's talking about, but rather, all that we do in response to the call of Christ: the things we do together as a Church plus the things we do as individuals to address the injustices and inequalities of life. There's nothing magical about those numbers, but my experiences line up with his. It can't be 90% action and 10% reflection without everyone burning out, but similarly it sure can't be 80% in here and only 20% out there or else everything gets very parochial. Christ's mission in the world, requires a healthy rhythm between meeting and welcoming and supporting one another as a community of faith, and hands-on engagement of the issues of the world out there, grounding ourselves in the holy energy of God in order to be vocal, active advocates for change.

Jesus, from a community bound together by love, sent 12 into the familiar nearby towns and 72 into the unknown territories up ahead, to open hearts to the already-present loving intention of God. We gather here, to acknowledge God's amazing love and to agree that we will live lives filled with that active, passionate love, reaching beyond our own needs to engage those who need to know that they are not alone: we are with them, and so is the dynamic, liberating presence of God. We live within that rhythm, of doing, and believing, and doing again, as people committed to Christ's agenda of powerful, inclusive love.

In all of this we give thanks: for the times we are together, for the times we are apart, for the times we feel strong in what we are doing, and for the times we really need the support of loving Christian community. All of these times, are pure gift from God, experienced in the beauty of creation and in simple acts of advocacy and kindness. Thanks be to God, Amen.

References cited:

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