

Sermon: April 26, 2020 – Acts 2: 14, 32-33, 36-47**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

What an amazing time it must have been.

As described in the book of Acts (2: 42-47), life in the earliest community of Christian believers was just about perfect. “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need...They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people”.

We hear of these wonderful qualities of community, and I’m hardly in a position to cast doubt on that. There and there are times when a group really is “in the zone”, whether that’s in an office, or a classroom, or a Church. Many people who have founded something, will particularly identify with the feeling of euphoria expressed in the 2nd chapter of Acts: there is little that can compare with the busy, chaotic, at times frightening days of an enterprise or a social movement that is in its infancy.

And yet: while the 2nd chapter of Acts couldn’t be more positive, other writings at the exact same time, speak of divisions and rivalries and threatened schisms, reminding us that when humans gather there are going to be differences in style and background and belief. Even as we are told how wonderful things were, we have to imagine that they had to figure out how to hold divergent opinions, how to support one another, how to forgive one another.

Last weekend, Canadians came face to face with a terrible, tragic happening in this land. People in quiet rural communities in Nova Scotia, a place of open hearts and unlocked doors, were terrorized, and twenty-two of them lost their lives at the hand of another. Those were people who began the weekend with every reason to believe that there would be future days ahead, they and their families and friends and neighbours sensing that the threats faced that day would most likely be related to COVID-19, rather than an unleashing of senseless violence.

Rev Faith March-MacCuish, Executive Minister of the Atlantic regions of the United Church of Canada, spoke at the United Church Vigil for Nova Scotia this past Wednesday. She mentioned how hard it has been for Canadians and Nova Scotians facing this loss, for when something this terrible happens, we want to say, “this is not who we are.” But then she points out that “today – *this is us.*”

Today, and any day in the shadow of tragedy, is a time of brokenness; and a significant part of who we are as a people, and who we are as the body of Christ, is defined by how we face our brokenness. We look at how we relate to planet earth and there is brokenness. We recall the history of intercultural engagement in this land and there is brokenness. We see the tendency to isolate and marginalize those outside the norms and there is brokenness. Our challenge, not just now, but always, is to walk with one another in all our brokenness, walking alongside one another with compassion and with accountability. I examine the brokenness of my own life, I listen to the brokenness of those crushed by grief, and while I am not quite ready to do so yet, I will in time wonder at the depths of brokenness within a soul that could carry out such cruelty.

And as I look at all these forms of brokenness, I turn again to that reading from Acts about the glory days of the early Church, and I no longer find myself worrying about whether those days were as good as the writer cracks them up to be. For perhaps what the author of these words is getting at, is what we look like when we are at our best. And whether the author is looking back at days gone by, or anticipating what life looks like when actually lived in Christ, doesn't really matter. When we are truly in Christ and of Christ, we are motivated by sharing rather than acquiring... we are better at separating our wants from our needs, which leads to everyone having their needs met... we are more supportive of one another, even amidst our differences. When we are at our best, when the light of Christ shines most brightly in us, we acknowledge our differences but do not let them divide us, because at the heart of it all is a commitment to love one another as God in Christ has loved us. In these days when we are already off-balance due to social distancing, we must not let tragic and terrifying events push us even further apart, as we come to be ruled by suspicion or fear. Even when we cannot be physically close to others, we can strive to notice the brokenness in ourselves and others, and commit to be there for one another, in the times when it is easy to be supportive, and the times when it's not easy at all.

And with that, I turn things over to Rev Faith March-MacCuish, who has graciously given me permission to share her words with you: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-1s4Hqr6fA&t=1181s>

{summary} 14:04-18:01 *our beautiful Nova Scotia – hard to get our heads & hearts around this. Emotions all over the place. Our hearts are broken. Our Prime Minister has said, “this is not who we are” and yet – today – this is us. We are broken and in need of one another, to walk together in tenderness and love. Scripture kept going through her mind that night, “Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness...intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words”. Our words are shaky and complicated by this time of Covid when we cannot do what we would usually do. In the Maritimes, the 6 degrees of separation are more like 2 – in our rural communities, people are more than just neighbours, they look out for each other, knocking on the door to ask, “are you OK?” – the “light is always on, door is always open” way of life. {end}*

In addition to our struggles to really determine “who we are” in the face of all this, we may also be caught off guard right now with the range of responses. While everyone has heard of these terrible happenings in Nova Scotia, not everyone is responding in a similar manner. Some were immediately moved to tears, some had no emotion of any sort left to offer. In these days of pandemic response, when everything is upside down, the way we respond to everything else in life is shaped by stress and worry and trauma. Earlier this month, Atlanta counsellor Dr Jennifer Yaeger, who names this time of pandemic as a time of trauma, offered these extremely helpful words:

- *“Feeling somewhat numb and out of touch with our emotions is normal, especially if you have lived through trauma before*
- *Some people are...more apt to feel hypervigilant or anxious, while others become hypoactive or depressed. Neither means anything other than indicating your predisposition to dealing with extreme stress*

- *When in the midst of trauma, just getting by emotionally and functionally is okay. Lowering expectations and being kind to yourself and others is vital.*"

So in addition to acknowledging the importance of walking together in our brokenness, we also acknowledge that not everyone is going to carry the emotional and spiritual weight in the same way, and that's OK. By now, many of us are offering as much as we are able to access, and if you cannot access much that doesn't mean you're failing, it doesn't mean that you are uncaring or unloving, it just means you are human, and completely loved by God.

We seek in these days to bear the light of Christ for one another, and just like the early Christians pooled their physical resources so everyone had what they needed to get by, perhaps we need to pool our emotional and spiritual resources, so we can stumble along together and all get where we need to be. Years ago, Catholic Contemplative writer Henri Nouwen talked of the journey from "walking wounded" to "wounded healer", coming to the point where our woundedness can be of service to others, and that is our journey today.

In these days of trauma, in these days of tragedy, we are so blessed to know the resurrection love of Christ, which is well acquainted with the very worst of human existence and proclaims that those hardships do not have the final word. As Faith March-MacCuish reminded us, love has the final word. Always. Whatever else we feel, fear or hatred or anger or blame... or just plain numb... *that* does not get the last word, *love* does. The love we have for one another in our brokenness, the love God has for us in our belovedness, the love that says there will be a better day.

Our hearts on this day, reach far to the east to Nova Scotia, to all members of the RCMP and any who regularly put themselves in harm's way for the public good, to all who are shaken by these events and seek hope for a new day. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the community of the Holy Spirit be with all this day, and always. Amen.

References cited:

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