

Sermon: 27 June 2021, 2 Corinthians 8: 7-15**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

As I approach this reading from 2nd Corinthians, chapter 8, it strikes me that the ministry of the Apostle Paul has similarities to the online ministry that we and many Churches have exerted during these past fifteen months. In his own day and in his own way, rather than being entirely reliant on in-person gatherings, Paul's ministry utilized the technologies available to him.

Watch at <https://youtu.be/uPbQkjadEw>

Any of us who had Bibles with colour plates, can remember the maps showing the missionary journeys of Paul, some of his travels being across land but also quite a bit of time sailing across the Mediterranean. Ships and other forms of conveyance were, then, a key technical support to his far-flung ministries. From those various places he not only helped organize and inform the local Churches; he also – and here we have the use of a technology again, albeit a pretty basic one – would write follow-up letters to those Churches where he had been. Similar to the digital ministries that many Churches started in 2020 and will continue even when all public health orders have ended, a goodly portion of Paul's ministry was delivered from a distance, without the benefit of being in the same room with people. Not exactly YouTube or Zoom, but ministry from a distance, nonetheless.

The impetus for today's reading is the need for all Churches in the area to contribute financially to support destitute Churches in Judea. Rather than recommending generosity for generosity's sake or citing the personal and communal benefits of giving cheerfully, or going the other direction and using guilt for leverage, Paul connects generosity to the example of Christ. He points to the humility of what God did in Jesus: utilizing a heaven above/earth below model, Paul says that in Christ, God exchanged the comfort of heaven to walk through all the ups and downs of human life and while on earth, gravitated toward those for whom life was most difficult. Reminding his readers then and now, of a God-in-Christ whose attention was always looking outward to those with the greatest burdens, Paul encourages the people of Corinth to pick up where they had left off a year earlier when this appeal for the poorer Churches began – to embrace the example of Christ as an encouragement to finished what they had started. Here are those verses again, verses 10 and 11 (CEV/TEV): “¹⁰ A year ago you were the first ones to give, and you gave because you wanted to. So listen to my advice. On with it...and finish the job! Be as eager to finish it as you were to plan it, and to do it with what you now have.”

Paul hearkens back to something that the Corinthian Church had made a commitment to twelve to eighteen months earlier and urges them to get back on track. I'm finding myself in this same space a lot these days, as the COVID infection and hospitalization numbers and R-factor have finally petered out and, we hope, the third wave is drawing to a close. There is still much concern around the Delta variants, and hesitation at throwing the doors open to big events like Stampede– yet it feels as if we do have reason to make plans for being in one another's presence again, at a coffee shop, in a living room, even, eventually, at Church. And as we make these preparations, think of who we were early in 2020, before the pandemic was declared: what our hopes and

plans and priorities were, our ways of being, our routines and ruts, our engagement of social justice or lack thereof. If we can even remember: early in 2020, what were we about to do, personally, or as a community or as a Church? What captured your imagination then? What worried or frustrated you? What new priorities were just taking shape? Where was the Spirit moving?

These past five hundred days have required many adaptations. We think of how we have related to public health orders, and how we deal with those who have received those public health regulations quite differently from the way we have. We think of learning how to work from home and not take unnecessary trips to get food or supplies... or if one was in a workplace that never did shut down but became governed by handwashing and hand sanitizer and 2m distancing, contact lists, face masks, taking temperature, asking questions, one would carry the range of emotions of dealing with the public day in and day out. For those with schoolchildren in their lives, there was herky-jerky rhythm of at-school, at-home; everything's OK, back into isolation; and then there were the realities of teachers who always needed to make flexible lesson plans that might be delivered in person or online or both. We think of activities in these months of public health advisory that became crucial to our emotional well-being, and activities that completely disappeared on us. We think of life transitions and milestones that either passed with scarcely a mention, or were marked in entirely new ways – some satisfactory, some not. We think of the voices that were raised about injustices present for many generations, and we bring to mind the faces and names of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd and the Indigenous Schoolchildren at Kamloops and Cowessess and locations yet to be named, whose deaths didn't even warrant the writing down of their name or burial location. We think of places where we were led to go deep, and we may have places we wanted to go deep but could not find the emotional and spiritual resolve to do so. We think of planet earth, and whether these months of liminality will change our relationship with the world and all who dwell therein. We think of the adaptability we have discovered, the fatigue we have experienced, and I am among those to notice the amount that I have aged in these past fifteen months.

All of these things change us. All of these things, cumulatively, will change who we are when we gather again as Church and how we as a Church relate to the community around us. And because we are not one homogenous type of person with one way to handle conflict, chaos and crisis, or one place on the introversion/extraversion scale, we will have experienced these months of apart-ness in a variety of ways. Once we begin gathering again, this uniqueness of each person's experience of these 15 months is something we need to pay attention to with patience and understanding and with a reliance on God's forgiving grace.

At an extremely helpful session held by our Chinook Winds Region this past week, Rev Andria Irwin reminded us that when in-person worship resumes, congregations can expect to have at least four categories of people: (1) those returning to Worship who have been online with us, and may well miss aspects of who we were as a YouTube entity; (2) those who are back to Worship and had not been connecting digitally, who will have missed a big collective memory of worship life in this time; (3) those who began attending online and are just now meeting us in person, tentatively walking in the doors and wondering if we will be as welcoming and dynamic in the flesh as we

seemed to be online? And (4) those who will either choose to or need to remain online without joining the congregation in-person, committed to this community of faith but needing us to retain online presence to keep them connected and spiritually fed. Not just in Worship, but in all our ways of being, we will need to be aware of the diverse needs within the congregation when we are back together again.

Paul, writing to that Church in Corinth with whom he had such a weird and wonderful relationship, names to them a time a year or so earlier... and the motivations and commitments they had then... and calls them, as people relating to Christ, to consider what all that is going to look like “with what they have now”. As we look at our pencilled-in plans, with a couple of outdoor services in August; with the need to look outward and not just inward, to the community needs of Banff and Canmore and Morley and all surrounding communities; with the challenge of starting to live into the commitments we have made as Affirming Ministries; with all these things, we can expect a degree of communal discombobulation. Learning who we are now, and what supports and accountability we need in order to be who Christ needs us to be, will require mutual encouragement, some re-setting of expectations, and no small amount of trial and error and the spaciousness to take those risks. In all of it, Paul reminds us of the example and presence of Christ Jesus, whose self-giving, ever-present love will be such an important touchstone for us now and into the future. As we gingerly step into whatever comes next, may Christ’s companionship on the journey be a tangible, real presence. Thanks be to God, Amen.

References consulted:

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