

Sunday September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021

**PRAYER:** O God, we have come together after a summer of adventures and are preparing for the hectic renewing of our lives. Some are preparing to return to school, some to employment, some to the ministries and activities that bring meaning and joy to our lives. On this precipice of new opportunities and experiences, make us a confident people. Renewed and strengthened by your love, and wisdom. And as we journey over this busy fall season, bind us together with strong ties of mutual love and care, so that together we may glorify you in all things. Amen.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O God, your ancient words of centuries ago still reach our ears, speaking truth into our lives, convicting us, challenging us to service and reminding us of your eternal love.

However, some of those ancient words found in the letter of James, reminds us that we are to be “doers of the word” not just listeners. It is never enough to just read your words, memorize them even, and not apply them in acts of justice, and mercy. It is not enough to use your ancient truths as simple platitudes or frivolous sayings on a greeting card. But we know as your Holy Spirit works in us that your word is a two-edged sword. Cutting away anything that is detrimental to our maturing in Christ and ministering in your name to our neighbours.

We confess Lord that we have not handled your word with steady and capable minds and hearts. We have twisted, misused and misinterpreted your words, to harm and push others away from your grace. Our arrogance knows no limits as we claim authority and make pronouncements, with a self-righteousness that would make even Pharisees blush. What is worse, O God, is that we align ourselves with friends and colleagues who share our distorted view of your Word, claiming the high road, and claiming to know your mind. Forgive us O God, for believing we can ever know you fully, and for thinking we know what is best for others or what your plan might be for them.

Thank you for revealing significant life truths to us. We know, that faithfulness is no guarantee of reward. We know that righteousness is no bestower of blessings. We know that truth is no guardian against calamity. We know that despite love hatred still exists. We know that good does not always repay good; and evil does not always find penalty. How we have misunderstood and abused your word with motives less than pure. In your grace filled treatment of us, we have demanded of ourselves and others that they must work their way to your favour. Remind us daily that our work, is a response to your grace not an effort to gain it.

And so, we ask, O God, as we rejoin our ministries and mission as your community of faith after our summer respite, not as a way to gain your favour, but as a way to dispense your favour to our hurting neighbours. Afghanistan, Haiti, election.

**BENEDICTION:** O Lord, as you have called us together to be hearers of your word, send us forth to be doers of your word. As your word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, in Jesus of Nazareth, let it become flesh and dwell among our neighbours, full of grace and truth, in us. Amen.

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Mark: 6:30-34; 53-56  
“Reconnecting”

Perhaps you are experiencing the same feelings I am that we are on the cusp of restarting; well, everything. Kids back to school. People returning to the office. Going to movies again. “Go Strand Go!” Eating in a restaurant without all that plexiglass, and servers who look like they are wearing hazmat suits. And for today’s consideration, there is the matter of rejoining each other at worship and restarting church activities.

To prepare us to consider this important topic, I have assembled just a few observations I gleaned from our time in the pandemic. I apologize if you feel this is “too soon”, but I’ll risk it. First up. Why did the chicken cross the road? Because the chicken behind it didn’t know how to social distance properly. Two grandmothers were bragging about their precious darlings. One of them said to the other, “Mine are so good at social distancing, they won’t even call me.” One mother noted. “Whose idea was it to sing “Happy Birthday” while washing your hands? Now every time I go to the bathroom, my kids expect me to walk out with a cake.”

Another said, “After years of wanting to thoroughly clean my house, but lacking the time, this week I discovered that wasn’t the reason.” Piece of advice. Every few days try your jeans on just to make sure they fit. Pajamas will have you believe all is well in the kingdom. Yesterday I ran out of soap and body wash and all I could find was dish detergent. Then it *Dawned* on me. Being quarantined with a talkative child is like having an insane parrot glued to your shoulder.

The World Health Organization announced during the pandemic that dogs cannot contract COVID-19. Dogs previously held in quarantine can now be released. To be clear, WHO let the dogs out. Another man said, “This morning I saw a neighbor talking to her cat. It was obvious she thought her cat understood her. I came into my house, told my dog—we laughed a lot.” How did the health experts lie? They said a mask and gloves was enough to go to the grocery store. When I got there, everyone else had clothes on. Finally, quarantine has really put a damper on comedy. For months nobody has walked into a bar.

All of this points to the fact that the pandemic has really changed things. Some of our behaviours will last for years to come. I have been wondering about what will change in the church and more specifically in our fellowship. We have been worshipping on line for months now, and I know it is the best we can do given restrictions, but it has not been ideal for many of us. We miss: seeing each other, hearing the choir, singing together, and so much more.

As we eventually move back to in-person worship, there will undoubtedly be a period of adjustment. That is why I really gravitated to an email I received from the publication “Christian Century”. I have subscribed for some time to their weekly thoughts on the lectionary lesson for the upcoming week. I rarely use what comes, other than for my own edification and meditation. But the one that came for July 18 spoke loudly to me.

The lectionary lesson for that day is the one I read for you, and the reflection of Yvette Schock was very helpful to me. Basically, Ms. Schock suggests this passage as a template for our reconnecting with each other as a church following the pandemic.

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The passage before us occurs immediately after the disciples have returned from having been sent out by Jesus. The disciples had little warning, and were given strict instructions about how they were to travel about and find their support. The only resource they had was the authority Jesus gave them and the partner they traveled with. The task was challenging. Preach the gospel of repentance and cast out evil spirits.

I imagine the disciples had no idea what to expect. They would have likely felt unprepared, and certainly unsure about how to proceed. The results of their missionary efforts were astounding. Mark tells us (6:13) that they cast out many demons, and anointed many sick people who were healed. Verse 30 tells us that they returned to Jesus and reported all that had happened. Now of great surprise, at least to me, is that there is no comment from Jesus about what they reported.

Maybe he did congratulate them in some way, but Mark doesn't record it. Instead, Mark focuses on something else. I am sure that the disciples missed being in the company of the twelve, and certainly with Jesus. Maybe they wondered about how the others were getting along, or what happened with Jesus when they were away. What transpired is actually quite moving. Jesus says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves, and rest a while."

What moves me at least, is this call by Jesus, is really a call to come back into fellowship. To reestablish their community. This time away together suggested by Jesus was very important, because the disciples needed to debrief. They needed to share their experiences, their ups and downs, and voice their questions. If I were to suggest a simple comparison, it is that we have been missing of late, our after-church fellowship times.

Jesus gives his disciples the floor, to tell their stories the way they wish to tell them. It is a critical part of being a community, or fellowship, and perhaps now more important than ever. As our church community returns to gathering in person, I am sure that many, if not all of us, will have stories about what has happened in our lives during the pandemic. Each of us may have good and hard things to share about what life was like for us.

Perhaps the most challenging thing for many of us, is simply reestablishing friendships that have been sitting stagnant for a while. Some of us have experienced losses during the pandemic. Some of us have had significant milestones reached in our lives that we could not share with anyone. I know in our fellowship there have been medical crises, relationship struggles, and a whole host of other ups and downs.

I guess the first thing I see in Jesus in this passage is that we need to allow each other the opportunity to share our stories. To catch up on the journey, so to speak. We need to be ready, willing, and able to listen; really listen, to what is being shared. We need to be ready to pray for each other, comfort each other, celebrate with each other, and allow others into our collective story. I guess that is what too often we forget.

As a community bound by faith in Christ, the disciple's story was not an individual possession. Peter's story was also John's, and James' and the rest of the twelve. Their story was the community's story, and Jesus' story. The ups and downs of the missionary endeavor were everyone's ups and down.

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Therefore, my story during the pandemic is also your story, and vice versa. It matters deeply what you all went through, because in the end, it affected you and therefore affects all of us. The Apostle Paul reminded us in 1 Corinthians 12 that when one of us suffers we all suffer, and when one of us rejoices we all rejoice. I think that this level of being one is the greatest loss in the pandemic.

As important as the lockdown was, and still is, it comes with a terrible cost. Only now are mental health professionals talking about the toll this pandemic has had on our emotional health. Opioid use, and overdose deaths, are epidemic in this province, and even in our community. Alcohol use, and more importantly abuse, has become a national pastime. Just think of how many Facebook posts over the last year have involved people talking about needing liquor to cope.

The collective wounds are very deep. Many of us have suffered in silence for far too long. Notice Jesus invited his disciples to “come away and rest a while”. Many of you might respond, “well I’ve rested enough, thank you very much.” I hear you. But maybe there is another more current lesson in Jesus’ invitation to “Come away and rest”.

Once the doors open to the church, I can almost guarantee there will be some excitement and certainly a great sense of relief. There will likely be a great eagerness for programs and events to reestablish. Our leadership has been dreaming of these days for a long time. On the other hand, though, I suspect that returning to “normal” (whatever that looks like) might overwhelm some folks. If the pandemic had any upside, it might be that some of us who needed to stop for a while from our hectic lives, may be reluctant to restart busy schedules.

Some of us may need to rest from the pandemic for a while. To just soak up the healing and strengthening of God’s presence in community. How we transition from pandemic to active church life needs to be well thought out by each one of us. I strongly suggest a measured approach. Like someone who has been hurt, or went through major surgery, needing physiotherapy. We may have to start slow.

We may find it important to rethink everything we do as a community of faith. Ask hard questions like: is this really important. Or something like, how can we keep our folks from getting so overwhelmed by events and programs that we think are important? It might be hard for some people to pick up the reins again, when they have enjoyed the more relaxed life. I mean who hasn’t like watching the church service in our PJs and drinking our morning coffee.

But we are being called back to each other. We may want to make some changes to our involvement, but your brothers and sisters need you to be present for them.

However, there is more to the story, isn’t there. Jesus’ plan to get away, and rest for a while, never happens. Instead, the crowds pursued them, crowding in to be healed, and to be taught. How Jesus responds to this is interesting. Jesus just kind of rolls with this development. He doesn’t push the crowd away to keep to his plan of rest and renewal. Instead, Jesus wades right in healing and teaching. I wonder, when we reopen, who is going to show up, looking for healing. How will we respond to the unexpected needs our community brings to us?

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And less anyone think the need to reconnect as a church family is not important, I point you to a study done by the University of York in England, and reported in the online publication called Phys.org on May 18, 2021. Some of what is revealed in the report is really, quite eye opening. Diana Evans, head of "Places of Worship Strategy for Historic England," one of the directors of the project, said:

"This report gives voice to the pain people experienced when places of worship were locked during the pandemic, leaving individuals and communities without access to spaces where they felt safe to mourn, find respite in beauty, and seek peace. It also shows the potential of local places of worship for people of all faiths, and none, as the country moves towards recovery; acting as symbols of their community's long-term survival while serving as local hubs for social care, practical support and companionship."

Dr. Dyas said: "Given what churches normally offer and their responses to the pandemic, they clearly have an indispensable role to play in recovery. There is increased recognition from local and national government of the great value of places of worship as community partners, and their contribution." (I think our own government leaders need to make the same recognition.)

It also stresses that experts and individuals on the ground, agree that the country is facing an "epidemic" of unresolved and unsupported grief and loss, which will take years to heal. Both specialized support and a return to normal social activity are vital if people are to be helped to move forward. Notice in this little report that restarting programming was not mentioned. The value of the church is listed as "local hubs for social care, practical support and companionship."

Some of us have missed programs and activities, but I bet that underneath even those expressed needs are the need for socializing. For example: Those who miss the choir, likely love to sing but it really is secondary to missing being together. The same goes for pickle ball, godly play, senior's lunches. All great programs that draw their value from connecting people to one another.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic book on Christian community, entitled *Life Together*, argues that Christian community is unlike any other community because of this unique bond, a bond that exists between each of us through Christ. When Jesus is at the center of our fellowship, the world is radically transformed. So, may the church be a relationship *among fellows*, a fellowship bound not by ethnicity, social class, or status, but by the redeeming power of Christ at work in us through the Holy Spirit.

We should pause right now and acknowledge that things are going to be different going forward. There will be some hesitancy to even be near each other given the ongoing corona virus variants. There will be some hesitancy to open ourselves up to the same levels of connectivity we had with each other, wondering if we still want our lives laid bare to the same people. And as I already mentioned, there will be some hesitancy to jump back into activities, maybe even going to church itself, given our long hiatus from them.

But we need each other and that is the heart of the matter. Remember then as Red Green says, "I'm rooting for you, we're all in this together".