

Spirituality Series: Sermon #3 – Neighbourhood & Commons
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, February 17, 2019

Matthew 22 and Revelation 22

Welcome to Sermon #3, the final sermon in the series on Spirituality, based on *Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution*, written by Diana Butler Bass in 2015. Diana is the author of 10 books, a few are: *A People’s History of Christianity*, and *Christianity after Religion*. In 2018, she published her latest book, *Grateful*.

Diana has held speaking engagements throughout North America, speaking about church trends and culture shift, and working with many denominations, both in Canada and the United States. She holds a PhD in Religious Studies and is an avid statistician, analyzing trends from religious and demographic data.

Grounded represents a complete departure in her writing style. If anything it is her spiritual memoir. A card carrying Episcopalian for most of her life, Diana became disengaged from traditional church and found herself without firm church roots. She became increasingly aware of how God was present all around her, in her relationships, where she lived, and in the world about her. Much of *Grounded* is an exploration of a God that we now experience beside us, near us, and not the distant God of the earlier traditional church, which Diana visualizes as an elevator church – God up on high, all knowing, but distant from us who are on the ground floor.

The first sermon looked at spirituality in the world about us, in dirt, water, and sky. We are a part of the delicate balance of ecosystems that govern this natural world. The second sermon explored how we look at our roots through our love of genealogy, where “we discover that the branches of our family trees are entangled ... it looks far more like a web.”¹ And ‘Home’ is the place where we go to lay our head at night. “We dwell at home. And God dwells there with us.”² And today, we will ask where is God in the Neighbourhood and Commons.

I remember listening to Mr. Rogers singing this song as he invited us into his home to share some time: “It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine? I’ve always wanted to have a neighbour just like you. I’ve always wanted to live in a neighbourhood with you.”

Diana Butler Bass traces the root of the word ‘Neighbour’ from the Old English words *neah* (or *Nigh*) and *gebur* for *dweller* – near dweller. The word neighbourhood came into use in the 1600’s as “a noun for a community of people who dwell near one another.”³ Neighbourhoods are born when people settle into a certain geographical space and turn it, in common effort with

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution*, (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 153.

² *Ibid.*, 169.

³ *Ibid.*, 196.

others, into a habitable place.” Neighbourhoods typically share resources, such as schools, roads, places of worship, stores, and often a park.⁴

I can easily remember my neighbours, both growing up with my parents, and in my adult life. Think how you have spent time with your neighbours! I remember times spent in my neighbours’ homes and backyards, standing in gardens and driveways, talking, laughing, and sharing. Some would say though that our present culture has changed this context. Some call it an ‘age of isolation’. Our sense of neighbourhood has shifted. While we may live in a physical neighbourhood, our sense of neighbourhood has expanded through social media – emails, facebook, twitter, and Instagram. Diana writes, “During the first hour of each day, I check on many thousands of people, some physically near, many near to my heart, and many more who are near in my thoughts or concerns. I think of all of them as my neighbours – and the places where I meet them as the multiplicity of the neighbourhoods in which I live.”⁵

A commons was typically an open space in the center of a town, where different groups could co-mingle during different functions, like celebrations and festivals, like our July Strawberry Festival here in Stouffville. The commons was a ‘fluid community’ that “could be formed of a variety of people, some in close proximity, some not, with both permanent and temporary structures, all interdependent on each other for emotional, economic, and political flourishing. Diana writes, “The commons is the geography of hospitality *belonging to none, welcoming all.*”⁶ While a neighbourhood “is about whom we live with, those next door, the common is what “we live *for*, the public world we make together – that serves the good *for* all.”⁷ ‘For the common good’ is what true community embraces.

“*Communitas* is a Latin noun for the spirit of community. *Communitas* creates a profound sense of equality and togetherness. Bass writes that “it is the opposite of the feeling of alienation and isolation. Instead, it is the movement of some sort of spirit in which people discover that solidarity is possible. Some sociologists have noted that *communitas* has spiritual or sacred dimensions through which people overcome division and achieve a new sense of identity and purpose.”⁸ We’ve experienced *communitas* at sports events, for example when the Blue Jays won the World Series – we experienced *communitas* – we were one. We met each other in the streets shouting, we honked horns while driving, we talked to people beside us. Bass suggests that ‘perhaps the loss of *communitas* is one reason why we feel our societies have declined and the commons feels empty. We have forgotten to dance in the streets with strangers.”⁹

Then there is the reality of the fence. We place fences to delineate our properties; sometimes to the point of keeping out those we don’t want to let in. Bass observes, “Strong neighbourhoods can be strong in the wrong ways, about the wrong things. But building communities on the basis of “likeness” is not really a problem either, for human beings have always build neighbourhoods around some principle of “likeness.” The difficult arises when

⁴ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 252.

strong ties and likeness mutate into exclusion and conformity.”¹⁰ Fences are dividers of communities. Have you ever had an issue with a neighbour over a fence? Trump just called a national emergency to build the wall separating Mexico from the American border. Do fences make good neighbours? Diana says, “we will always have fences. But good fences have gates.”¹¹

In an interview, Diana commented, “We’re not understanding at some really deep level in our soul that [things] have changed the way people experience and apprehend God ... the world has profoundly changed ... We need an entirely new kind of theological language ... a language that honours what we’ve had and what we’ve done, but that also makes space for a new experience of God ... We haven’t done that very seriously in the late 20th and early 21st century. We haven’t done that, and it needs to happen.”¹²

This age of isolation has also impacted the church. Diana theorizes, “The real problem is that, in the last two centuries, religion has actually allowed itself to become privatized. In the same way that our political and economic concerns contracted from “we” to “me”, so has our sense of God and faith. In many quarters, religion abandoned a prophetic and creative vision for humanity’s common life in favour of an individual quest to get [one’s sorry ass] to heaven. And, in the process, community became isolated behind the walls of buildings where worship experiences corresponded to members’ tastes and preferences and confirmed their political views.”¹³

Diana prophetically asks us to look at what we are doing: “For a spiritual revolution to make any real difference, it must reclaim the primal sense of religion – the “we” – the power that binds us to one another, to God, and to the world. To encounter God here, we must walk out of buildings and discover the life of the commons.”¹⁴

When asked by the Pharisees to name the greatest commandment, Jesus answered, “You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”¹⁵ ‘Love your neighbour’ is the epicenter of the Golden Rule, which is expressed in all the world’s religions. Some of you may recognize this poster which is found in schools and churches and institutions worldwide.

Diana writes, “Being neighbourly is the path to empathy, of enacting the Golden Rule. Building the commons, the “we” of our world house, is to pull the vision of heavens out of the clouds to earth here and now.”¹⁶ From the Book of Revelation: “See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. (21:3)

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹² “Finding God in the World: An Interview with Diana Butler Bass”, by Deborah Arca, Patheos.com (found on www.dianabutlerbass.com)

¹³ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 274.

Spirituality *is* about opening your heart
to discover and embrace God
in the world around you,
in the natural world,
in the place you call home,
in your neighbourhood
and in the greater community of the commons.

God is near.

You *are* grounded in this world.

Amen.