

“Creating Community”
Stouffville United Church
D Min Sermon #3, Year 2
Sunday, January 13, 2019

Acts 10

In his book *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith*, Rev. Dr. John Pentland offers Hillhurst United Church’s description of community: “Whenever we create together we create so much more than the “thing” – we create bonds and friendships, we create memories, we create capacities and talents, we create anticipation of the future – this is how we’re defining *community*.¹

Stouffville United Church certainly knows how to create community. It’s in our DNA. I read through the pages of the history book, “Stouffville 1877 to 1977” by Jean Barkey and I recognized names from this church in almost every activity under the sun that took place during those 100 years. We were front and center in the community.

In the sports department, we had people recognized in Speed Skating, Curling, Lawn Bowling, Lacrosse, Hockey, and Baseball, and yes, international ploughing matches qualify too. Service organizations were richly populated by church members, from the CGIT, the 4-H Club, the Masonic Lodge, the Women’s Institute, to the Lions Club. Musically, we had singers and instrumentalists in the Stouffville Choral Society and Orchestra.

But probably the most impactful group was the United Church Couples Club, which just celebrated its 60th year, which brought Music Mania into our lives and which defined this town in so many ways. For one hundred years, creating community was easy for us for we *were* the community.

In the five years between 2011 and 2016, Stouffville grew 22% making it the second fastest growing municipality in York Region. From a beginning population of 950 citizens in 1885², the town is now projecting a total population of almost 56,000 in 2 years time. If I had the task of adding the years of 1977 to 2017 in Jean Barkey’s Stouffville history book, I don’t know what I’d say. So much has changed. So much of what defined Stouffville has lost its high profile. It’s a different world out there. How do we get back in the picture?

It was a different world back in Jerusalem when the Apostles Peter and Paul were spreading the Good News. And the Book of Acts chronicles every step of their way. Peter would be the one to move the Gospel out of Jerusalem and into the neighbouring regions, handing the baton over to Paul to take the Gospel all the way to Rome, the center of the Empire.

In our Acts passage, we first meet Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. It’s 3 o’clock in the afternoon, and out of nowhere, an angel appears before him and tells him to send for a man

¹ Rev. Dr. John Pentland, *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith*, (Toronto: Edge: A Network of Ministry Development, 2015), 162-163.

² Jean Barkey, Ed., *Stouffville 1887 to 1997*, (Toronto: The Bryant Press, 1977), 13.

called Peter who is staying at a tanner's house by the Sea, near the town of Joppa, 50 km away. Cornelius listens and obeys, diligently dispatching a soldier and two servants to Joppa, who set off at a smart military pace.

The next day, we read that Peter is going to the rooftop to pray. Houses often had awnings on the rooftops to protect people from the hot sunlight. Peter is hungry, and while someone is preparing his lunch, he goes into a trance and has a vision of a white sheet (which some historians feel is actually just a memory of the awning over his head³), and on it are animals, and reptiles and birds. God says, "Kill and eat." Peter realizes to his horror that he cannot eat any of the meat because the animals are all on the "Do Not Eat This" list, otherwise known as the Purity Laws found in the Book of Leviticus. Three times the vision descends upon his imagination and three times Peter hears God say, Eat. While still puzzling over the vision, Cornelius' party arrives at the house and they are welcomed by Peter and stay the night.

The Holy Spirit has been busy putting together a highly orchestrated and complicated event. Two visions in two houses 50 kms apart, involving four days of travel. These visions anchor an extraordinary event in the formation of Christianity. For the Spirit is about to erase what was, and usher in the new with a precision that is astounding.

The entourage from Joppa arrive in Caesarea after a two day journey. And they are all together in one big room in the Centurion's house. Peter and Cornelius should never have been together. Peter says to the assembled people, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile." (vs. 28) I am sure that Cornelius was a gracious host and there was a table groaning with food to offer his guests after a two days' journey and among the plates and platters I am sure would be food that to Peter and his followers would physically make them gag. For it was food they are not to eat. With stunning timing, Peter's vision is now before his very eyes.

So many things were breaking down in that room. The mingling with the wrong people. The tables covered with platters of forbidden food. Peter and his crew are filled with anxiety and stress. The Centurion and his household are probably not too far behind. Visions and angels. Puzzlement and suspense. Searching and finding, these are all held in the Spirit's embrace and all is about to be revealed in the very next minute.

Alan Roxburgh is the founder of the Missional Network, and lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. He has written many books about the Church in changing contexts. Roxburgh offers a few current statistics about church attendance in Canada, which suggest a gradual unravelling of place and importance of the church in our time: "If you were born between 1925 and 1945, there is a 60 % chance you are in church today. If you were between 1946 and 1964, there is a 40% chance you are in church today. Between 1965 and 1983, 20%. Born after 1984? 10% chance of being in church today."⁴ And I'm going to extrapolate the data further which suggests that from

³ David Alexander, Pat Alexander, Editors, *Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 557.

⁴ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), 6.

2002 to 2020, the number will be a big fat ‘zero’. So if people won’t be coming through our doors anytime soon, how do we create community?

I was speaking with Rev. Dr. Christine Jerrett, from the New Ministries Team of the United Church of Canada. She is cofacilitating monthly online meetings for the recipients of funding from the United Church’s New Ministries Fund, of which we are one. She shared with me the work she did in 2016 with a few congregations from the Bay of Quinte and Hamilton Conferences. She helped these congregations to see a future path by becoming more effective at discerning the voice of the Holy Spirit in their community.

Based on Alan Roxburgh’s book, *Joining God, Remaking Church, Changing the World*, the participants opened themselves to whatever God wanted to bring to them, by simply praying, “God, what do you want me to hear? What do you want me to see?” From the project’s report, “*Into the Promise*”, I want to give you a few observations about what happened. “[The participants] often felt they were not *doing* anything. However, as they persevered, people began to have what they termed ‘*Into the Promise*’ moments – encounters where they had a sense that Someone Else was at work, bringing people together, opening opportunities for deep conversation, making connections. They were standing on holy ground.”⁵ “About six months into the project, people started saying, “We didn’t think we were doing anything. Now we realize that God was working in us, changing us.”⁶ “They became less concerned with whether or not they could get more people to come to their church. They focused more on developing relationships with people outside their usual church activities and discerning where the Holy Spirit was present and at work in those connections.”⁷ The report summarized: “Congregations begin to look beyond their own walls and activities and realize God is at work in the lives of people they would not normally have encountered. The story that the congregation tells starts to shift from anxiety about not having enough people and money towards amazement at and excitement about the work God is doing.”⁸

Everyone is gathered in the centurion’s house. Cornelius says to Peter, ‘Tell us all you know’. And Peter tells them of Jesus and his ministry, how Jesus was killed, resurrected, and lived among them, commanding them to preach and testify to the people. Then just as Peter is getting to the punch line of his sermon, suddenly, out of nowhere, WHOOSH, the Holy Spirit sweeps in. “While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.” (vs. 44)

Now the game changes. It is no longer about the food on the table. It is no longer about who is in the room. It is suddenly something much bigger than all of this. Because now it is about the breaking down of what was to what is.

⁵ Rev. Dr. Christine Jerrett, *Into the Promise Report*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

And when the dust settles, the astounded Peter and his friends from Joppa realize that where once they ‘owned’ the whole story, it isn’t exclusively theirs anymore. It is now everyone’s story. “Peter finds his long held assumptions replaced by the new thing that God is doing.”⁹ It is no longer the sole domain of the disciples who were poured upon by the Spirit in that Upper Room on the day of Pentecost. But here is now a *Second Pentecost*¹⁰, and the Spirit is once again in the room, and this time the Spirit shows no discrimination or selection in who is to receive the anointing of the Spirit. Scripture records: “The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out *even on the gentiles.*” (vs. 45)

The Holy Spirit sweeps down upon everyone in the room, but this time there is a difference. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on them *just as they are*. Peter and his followers are shocked. It was like what the Grinch must have felt when he saw the Whos of Whoville still singing about Christmas even when all the toys had been taken away, “It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags.” Christmas came anyway.

The Holy Spirit came anyway. It came without asking for credentials. It came without needing proof of good works, or knowledge of the scriptures. And Peter remembered the vision of the food on the sheet and realized it was meant for this moment before his eyes. That God’s baptism of the spirit falls upon anyone and everyone, that the Holy Spirit makes no distinctions. Where once Peter and the disciples were the chosen ones, now the chosen ones are everyone.

As a commentary underscores, “But now there appears another category of folks, drawn from “every nation” (v. 35), who have no previous experience with Jesus and have little if any understanding of the Jewish faith or what makes Jesus significant within it. Their qualification is that God finds them acceptable.”¹¹

The Holy Spirit led Peter and then Paul into the world to create Christian community. And the Spirit is leading us out of isolation and into the fullness of community. We know how to create community inside these four walls and within our church family. But now, the Spirit is calling us to ‘join’ the community out there in ways that create, as theologian Willie Jennings will name it, a common, where relationships are based on mutuality; where there is no hierarchy, where there is no ‘other’, where you are accepted for who you are right now, in this minute.

Jennings takes the name ‘common’ from Acts 2:44: All who believed were together and had all things in common. He says that “it will be in the common that a mutuality will be experienced that will release the people from the assimilation and segregation that the dominant culture has placed upon them, leading to the ability to create community for all.”¹²

⁹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), Pastoral Perspective, 372.

¹⁰ David Alexander, Pat Alexander, Editors, *Eerdmans Handbook to the Bible*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 557.

¹¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), Pastoral Perspective, 372.

¹² Elizabeth Cunningham, Reflection Paper: Elective: The Spirituality of Preaching, November 23, 2018, 9.

It will be, as renowned African American preacher, Dr. Howard Thurman preached, “I can love only when I meet you where you are, as you are, and treat you there as if you were where you ought to be.”¹³

‘Out of nowhere’ is the Spirit’s signature trademark, signalling that the Holy Spirit has been here, stirring, disturbing, even creating absolute chaos, to create community that is embedded in a mutuality that reflects a Love that embraces us all.

Out of nowhere,
the Holy Spirit flew
into that Upper Room
and the First Pentecost
came into being
and she drew the circle wide.

Out of nowhere,
the Holy Spirit flew
into the Centurion’s house
and the Second Pentecost
came into being
and she drew the circle
so wide that it encompassed the world.

And out of nowhere,
maybe even now,
the Holy Spirit suddenly,
brilliantly,
flies here to unsettle us,
flies here to challenge us,
flies here to lead us,
to create Community for all,
here in this place.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹³ Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 80.