

“When All Are One”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, May 24, 2020

Acts 1 and John 17

We are more than two months into our new ‘normal’. And what a learning curve we’ve experienced in a hundred different ways. People are working from home. Meetings are being held through zoom. Families are having a long stay-cation in their home. Church has gone ‘virtual’. The Earth is breathing a sigh of relief for now the air is cleaner, the waters clearer, and the hum of humanity is down quite a few notches.

In a conversation about the Covid-19 pandemic with William Willimon, author of over 60 books about church ministry, he made the statement – ‘You know how people are saying, ‘We’re all in this together!’ Well, no, we’re not. I live in a home where I am comfortable and have space but many do not. The pandemic has revealed huge fault lines and injustices.’¹

We are witnessing a startling reversal of who is making the wheels go around. Our society is starting to notice that it’s not the people in the business towers, in the financial districts, in the government offices that are running the show. But it’s the people who are holding two or three jobs at minimum wage to make enough money to survive, to feed their families, to afford housing. It’s the people who are being asked to risk their own personal safety, and that of their families, to be in the hospitals, to be in the medical centers, to be the first responders in our police, fire and paramedic teams. It is the cleaners, the transit drivers, the truckers. These are all the people who are making it possible for the majority of us to keep on going.

Will things go back to the way they were? Many hope and pray that they don’t. Because now we are seeing things we didn’t see before. We are beginning to see the needs of others.

This past week, I’ve been attending the ‘virtual’ Festival of Homiletics, an annual conference for preachers in North America. It was to have been in Atlanta, Georgia this year. Chicago preacher, Otis Moss III is a ‘regular’ at the Festival. And he preached on ‘Living in the Certainty of Uncertainty’. With the advantages of a great tech team, he interposed pictures and music into his sermon. And he spoke of the ‘frame’ we carry with us –he drew the frame in the air around him, and then poof there was the frame on the screen. It helped me visualize the frame that I walk around with.

I realize that the frame directs what I see and that I rarely look on purpose outside of that frame. My frame equates to my comfort zone – I look at what I know. I look at what I am comfortable with. Chances are that if you’re not in my frame, I don’t see you. What do you see through your frame? What does our church see through its frame? What does God see through God’s frame?

The corona virus has had a devastating impact on the people who use our shelter systems. Shelters are compromised because of their limited physical space – to be able to move cots and

¹ William Willimon, Festival of Homiletics Interview, Monday, May 19, 2020.

mattresses six feet from each other, as well as to reconfigure the eating areas in main meeting places. It's taken time for the system to respond to the need but it's getting there. York Region opened up a transitional shelter on May 13th. The goals of the transitional site are to decrease the spread of Covid-19 amongst the homeless population by giving individuals and couples a place to self-isolate for 14 days. Each person will have their own room and private bathroom, 3 meals per day plus snacks, laundry and room cleaning service. They will have access to support services. The people staying there must be willing to work on housing.

There has been tremendous energy supporting this surge of supports for the homeless population who are so vulnerable during this pandemic. How can we keep the energy moving forward to finding housing for the homeless ... so that they can continue to live in a place that has a door and a key? The pandemic has created these responses that are just now breaking through old patterns of resistance, or even denial.

In Acts 1, the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" No doubt, the disciples have their own idea of what that would look like – a return to the glory of a former age – to restore it to what it was. But Jesus had much different ideas of what the restored Kingdom would be like. And its foundation would be based on love, not power.² As William Willimon observed, the 'Restoration of the Kingdom' will be defined by decisions made that are based on humanitarian and not economic rationale.³

A guy on a grate or a park bench. We turn away and look somewhere else. And if we do see them, we 'recognize' them because they fit the 'stereotype' society has placed on them, and then we move on. From Cathy Crowe's book, "Dying for a Home: Homeless Activists Speak Out", these comments from homeless people reflect on the societal baggage we place on them. We see them lying in sleeping bags – one guy said he wakes up to 6 inches of snow on his sleeping bag.⁴ Another said it's hard to go for a job interview with a sleeping bag and a knapsack.⁵ One homeless man says he was given 8 tickets in one night for sitting in a park while he waited for a shelter to open.⁶

Cathy Crowe the Toronto street nurse has a different frame: "The stereotype of a man lying prone on a sidewalk or heating grate, has never fit with the people I knew to be homeless. Over the years I've met artists, engineers, truckers, hydro workers. Highly skilled steelworkers, professionals like police officers and nurses, war vets, and of course, families. Some ended up living on those grates, but mostly I saw people upright, struggling 24/7 to survive, caught in a labyrinth to find food, shelter, health care."⁷

You know the poem, He loves me, he loves me not – and you used a daisy to pick off the petals with each phrase, to find it if he loved you ... or not. Bonnie Briggs and Sara Boyles, two homeless women, wrote a poem in 2006 as a lament for not being in the 'frame' of the

² Feasting on the Word, Pastoral Perspective, Year A, Volume 2, 524.

³ William Willimon, Festival of Homiletics Interview, Monday, May 19, 2020.

⁴ Cathy Crowe, 123.

⁵ Cathy Crowe, 109.

⁶ Cathy Crowe, 110.

⁷ Cathy Crowe, 139.

government agencies that could bring the housing they want – if they were seen. Here is part of it:

Liberals, Conservatives, and the Greens,
love me, love me not.
The Feds, the Province, the City,
love me, love me not.
With each old promise unfulfilled,
a petal drops, love unfulfilled.
Love me, love me not...

Love must shout from roof top and grate,
“Housing is basic, something we all need.”
One needs an address, a door to lock,
and even a little furry cat...

Love me, love me not,
the children’s chanting says.
But love me deep, love me true,
brings the change we want
for me and you.”⁸

In our gospel text today, Jesus says, ‘So that they may be one, as we are one. He is offering us this ‘relational matrix’⁹ in this extraordinary picture of the relationship between Father and Son. A commentary wrote, “When Jesus prays that his followers may be one as he and the Father are one, he is praying all of us into this mystery too. Not just that we should each become one with God, or one with Christ, but that we should become one with each other in the way Jesus and the Father are one.”¹⁰ The United Church of Canada’s crest has the inscription, ‘ut omnes unum sint’ that means ‘that all may be one.

A homeless man simply named Dri delivered a speech in a blizzard outside the Chateau Laurier Hotel in Quebec City where the federal-provincial-territorial housing ministers were meeting in 2001. He said “We are all we. We need to convince the other we, that we need help. We need housing. We need housing.”¹¹

We are all we.

So that they may be one, as we are one.

Discard the frame. Throw it away. So that we may all be one.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁸ Cathy Crowe, 156-157.

⁹ Feasting on the Word, Theological Perspective, Year A, Volume 2, 522.

¹⁰ Feasting on the Word, Homiletical Perspective, Year A, Volume 2, 541.

¹¹ Cathy Crowe, 48, 60.