

“Resting in the Spirit”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, July 12, 2020

Romans 8:1-11

I want to preface this sermon by telling you that while it is a message for Stouffville United Church, speaking to where they happen to be in this time and space, I hope that you will also receive a message of hope and renewal for you, wherever you are in your faith journey.

Looking through my calendar from early 2020, it was filled with church events. Sunday morning worship services. The worship services at Stouffville Creek Retirement Residence and at Parkview Nursing Home. The twice a month Wednesday Night Church service. The Monday Quilters. The Tuesday morning bible study at Parkview Village. Friday morning coffee with the Rev at Tim Hortons. The twice a month luncheons at the church. Church Committee meetings. The Monthly Messy Church. The Monthly Prayer Mantle knitting group. The monthly UCW meeting. The Dinner & a Movie Crowd. Visits to parishioners in their homes. Funerals, hospital visits, meetings with the wider church.

And then there is a note on Sunday, March 15, Third Sunday in Lent which reads: Cancel – Covid-19. And that’s when our world tilted. That’s when Covid-19 threw the church off balance.

My Facebook clergy groups were wringing their hands over what would happen to the upcoming Easter Service – with its trumpets and lilies? Our response to the pandemic shut down was immediate and worship focused – and not, as a colleague pointed out, on what was happening to the vulnerable in our society.

Remember how instantly the grocery shelves were emptied of toilet paper? Only to see in social media, pictures of the elderly standing in front of an empty shelf, looking at a box with a few discarded items that no one wanted. In the community’s haste to look after its own self-interests, including the church, we forgot about the vulnerable, the elderly. Our focus became about ‘worldly’ things.

Paul will talk about worldly things in the Romans text today. But instead of worldly, he will use the word ‘flesh’. In Romans 8, verses 5 and 6, we read: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

A commentary offers a list of ‘things of the flesh’ in our world, observing that ‘flesh’ could be thought of as “our focus on the self rather than on God.” They go on, “Money, financial security, youth, health, work, good looks, busyness, and technology are just a few of the things we worship instead of God.”¹

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, Homiletical Perspective, 233.

It is all too easy to see the ways in which a church can become bogged down by the ‘flesh’ and not the spirit, with its focus on budgets and financial constraints, its worry about less people in the pews, no young people, its confession of no energy. Just as our world is dominated by the worldly things that consume us, distract us, deter us, and often overwhelm us, so too in the church, we hold on to these worldly details because they have become our reality. And we struggle to find the ‘why’ and the ‘when’ and the ‘how’ of letting go of them in order to set our minds on the things of the Spirit.

We have had four months of no church. And it is laying bare our identity. Who *are* we if we don’t meet physically on a Sunday morning at 10:30 to worship together? During the pandemic, people are finding a meaningful worship experience in the online worship services we are offering. They can experience worship in a time that suits them, when they are relaxed and ready to receive God’s love and God’s word, in a place in which they are comfortable, like a comfy chair or couch. Worship at 10:30 on a Sunday morning has truly become a ‘moveable’ feast.

Does our Christian identity change now that Sunday morning at 10:30 no longer anchors it? When the pandemic restrictions allow more people to gather in an indoor space, to come to church for worship, many churches will also offer a streamed ‘live’ worship, or a recorded worship that can be watched at another time. Our identity as a congregation will still find us gathered for worship but at different times and in different ways, in person, or through the internet. With this new space opening up in us as a church, where Sunday morning at 10:30 is no longer the leading identifier of who we, where is this leading us?

It is a time of unprecedented newness. Here is some newness for you to consider. Stuart Murray asks, “Are there better ways than “keeping Sunday special” to observe the principle of Sabbath?”² The concept of the Sabbath is traditionally anchored to Sunday. Think of Genesis 2:2-3 “And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.” Imagine now that the Sabbath will be found anywhere during the week that fits better into people’s lives. Here is newness.

What is asking to be birthed into this new space within us, as a church? It’s as if we’re being given a marker and a large white board and the Holy Spirit is saying, ok, now draw! But, how do we move forward when we don’t know where we’re going? I think of Abram and Sarah, asked to leave their homeland and head to a land that God would show them. I think of David, the shepherd boy out back in the field; of Samuel, only a boy of six; of Mary, a girl; of the disciples, with only the clothes on their back and a walking stick, sent out into the world. So much was unscripted but *became* the script. These people did not live by the flesh, but reached out with the spirit. Trusting. Moving forward.

This is what I see in you. Fatigue. Tiredness. Clinging to the known. There is a decided tiredness in our congregation because dealing with all this ‘worldly’ fleshy work is exhausting – worrying about our finances, our building, our future. How do we get through this stage that is

² Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 209.

tiring and awkward? When will we feel our wings spreading? How will we honour all that we have been? How will our church family still feel connected and loved, a part of each other, as we move into a way of being church that will look and feel different?

Rest is necessary for the newness ahead, for the different landscape. It's time to find some rehabilitating rest in the Spirit. Time to find rest for the journey ahead. And the summer months give us just such a time – a more relaxed rhythm to the days, the world about us to take time noticing and pausing and pondering.

I watched a very young swallow land on a wire, the parent next to it. It was entranced by the world about it and sat there for a long while, even after a parent tried once or twice to encourage it to fly again, which it did in time.

It takes time to find our wings. It takes time to adjust to a new experience. Like the young swallow, it is no different for you and I who find ourselves in a different landscape, for the first time. The Spirit will offer encouragement. And it will take time to find our wings. As Sarah Travis encourages us, “Our life as a church depends not on a return to power and glory, but in a willingness to go where we have not been before.”³

This newness you will only find when you set your mind on the Spirit, and not on the flesh. When you set your mind on the Spirit, and not the flesh, you will experience differences in your energy, your work, your sense of community where... once you were burdened, now you are free. Once you were stalled, now you are moving. Once you were directionless, now you have a direction. Once you were exhausted, now you are energized. Once you were tired, now you soar.

To set the mind on the flesh is death. But to set the mind on the Spirit, is life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Sarah Travis, *Metamorphosis: Preaching After Christendom* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 105.