

Sermon: 4th in Creation & Worldwide Communion

Scripture: Lamentations 3: 19-26 & Luke 17: 5-10

The Christian church, in all its many denominations, in all its differences of opinion and all its theological stances, is gathered this morning all over the world to celebrate and to remember the one thing we truly have in common. As Lois Wilson so aptly put it in her inaugural address as the first woman Moderator of the United Church of Canada: **We are all here in this room because of Jesus.**

We will celebrate and share Holy Communion this morning as part of something much larger than ourselves – much larger than the UCC – much larger than the church in North America. We are communing this morning with all God's Christian family from the east and the west, from the north and the south – truly from all corners of the earth.

We, as church, have been rocked to our foundations by the sex abuse scandals of the Roman church, and we are still working to heal the damage caused by our own United Church to our First Nations people through the Residential School system. As church we are called to repentance.

Last week we looked at the damage we are causing the earth. It's not easy to look at what we have done – to take responsibility – and to move forward making healthier choices.

So battered and torn we turn again to God, asking to be forgiven, asking to be shown a better way **to be** in our communities.

These are not comfortable times to call ourselves “church” in the world. But we are here. Bruised and bleeding, humiliated by behaviours we didn’t do and would never think of doing – we are here, declaring the wonder of the teachings and example of one man – Jesus Christ.

So why are we still here when so many have left the church? When people laugh at our devotion, or point fingers at our history, or there is yet another TV documentary detailing the betrayal of trust of yet another priest or clergy person – why do we stay?

It’s not actually easy to answer that question, is it? There are probably as many different answers as there are people here this morning. Maybe some of us have never actually thought about it – we just come every Sunday because we always have. Or maybe we have a deep gut “calling” that says – **I am a follower of Jesus Christ, and that is all that is important here.**

You’ve all seen ministers come and go. You’ve been led by preachers who were more or less evangelical, more or less charismatic. But the primary message has never changed much...Jesus said, **Follow me!** And so that is what we do. We come to church and we listen for the stirrings of the Spirit in our time together in this place. Sometimes we leave filled and nourished. Other times we feel like the spring is dry – there has not been much feeling of spiritual nourishment.

Our reading from Lamentations (3: 19-26) deals with this problem quite poetically: *The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope; the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an*

end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him." And this is the part where we find out how to do this: The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

We, each of us, are responsible for our own spiritual health. What is being spoken of in this passage from Lamentations is the need to spend time "waiting" on God – listening quietly for the direction of Spirit in our lives. We are all different and how we choose to do our spiritual practice may vary quite a bit. For some of us, gardening is our spiritual discipline – our time of communing with God. Hiking in the mountains, kayaking alone on a lake or ocean may suit a more active person. Sitting quietly in meditation or prayer for a specified period of time every day, if it's only for a few minutes, will be found to be spiritually uplifting and refreshing, and is available to anyone.

What is offered on Sunday morning is just that – an offering. Each of us will hear or experience what is offered differently. I have walked away from what I thought was the worst service I have ever given, only to be met by a parishioner at the door in tears, thanking me, and saying that message was just for her! The rest of you, on that Sunday, may have felt that the message was not for you at all. But maybe the music spoke to you, or maybe you really felt connected when we prayed together. In any case, Sunday is our time to come together and to join our hearts and prayers together for the greater good not only of our church, but of the wider community, and even the world. It is a "service" – it is part of our work as Christians . It is what is minimally expected of us.

In the Gospel reading from Luke this morning (17: 5-10), the disciples asked Jesus: “Increase our faith!” Jesus answers them rather obliquely, I thought. His answer, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed...” seems to say that they don’t have very much faith, or they would be able to perform miracles, and then he goes on to talk about the slave who doesn’t get to have supper until all the work is done.

We might look at that and feel that the master is abusing his slave – but if we enlarge the parable, and see that the master is actually **God** (since we are talking about faith, remember), and we, as followers of Jesus are servants, if not slaves of God – then we are privileged to serve God, and have no right to expect reward for what we are called, as seekers and followers, to do as our duty to God, for the greater good of humanity and for all of God’s Creation. In fact, as scripture points out to us, we may expect persecution and death for doing the right thing.

I think of a young man named Herve Dalmatio, a computer scientist previously employed by the private Swiss bank, HSBC, who seeing that the banking system in that country afforded the wealthy a safe haven for tax evasion in their own countries, committed an illegal act. He “stole” personal data, downloading it to his own computer, fled the country and then with the help of the police in France, made available to various governments (Canada among them) information regarding persons who may be guilty of tax evasion. It’s a Robin Hood story – it’s a “What would Jesus do?” story. Tax evasion by the rich costs our governments millions of dollars every year – money that could provide badly needed services for poor people. Interviewed by the CBC, this young man said he did it because it needed to be done, and he was the right person in the right place with the right skills to do it. He says he is happy with his decision and with the results, and

encourages governments to work on plugging the legal loopholes that make it possible for the rich to do this. He also said that he has no money and no job and “does not expect to die of natural causes.” But he is happy – because he did the right thing.

I also think of a person right here on Texada who is very soon donating a kidney to a young man who needs it. He’s not a close relative – but nothing else was working for him, and his future didn’t look too bright. This person decided to see if by any chance at all they might be a match for him – and it turns out they are and so it will happen. This person told me that they have always known that God had work for them to do – and they are very satisfied that this “call” just might be it!

The point, friends, is that we all have work to do for the greater good. It’s also true that we are few in number and many of us are elderly. But we can pray for God to find and use people for God’s purposes, and we can celebrate those who clearly are hearing the call and doing “the right thing” whether those people are religious or not.

This is God’s wondrous world – and we are privileged to have experienced or felt **something** of the ineffable, unknowable, but living presence that we call God. For us to grow in faith we need to know who we are, and whose we are, and we need to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to the ongoing dream of the living God.

People of God, we are living in the midst of mind-boggling change. It looks a lot like social breakdown and chaos, but in the midst of all that turmoil and upheaval it must be remembered that there is huge potential for something new and better to be born. We must learn to trust – to have faith – that the living God we are following with Jesus

knows where we are going. We must learn to wait on the Lord – to sit quietly for a few moments every day opening ourselves to the Spirit’s call and asking in our hearts, “How may I serve today?”

As we celebrate Worldwide Communion in a few moments, let us cleanse ourselves of divisive thoughts and attitudes, and prepare to honour all God’s children all over the world. Let us also remember that the earth is under siege, and needs our care and concern this morning.

And then, let us celebrate the huge potential that exists today for Christians all over the world to come together in unity with each other and with all of God’s Creation to sing a new song – a song of faith in new beginnings.

Let us sing together: 703VU – “In the Bulb There is a Flower”