

## **Take Heart**

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Psalm 34

Mathew 14: 22-33

Psalm 36

November 22, 2009-UM

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

I am going to touch on a number of things this morning... the reality of our faith community life this fall... to our interactions with each other, to fear, to playing Zuma, a video game, to scripture.

And I will trust that the links between them become apparent.

Fall is always a busy time of year... committees start meeting again, Sunday School and choir practice begins, cottages get closed up for the winter, card parties start, stewardship campaigns begin and everyone gets back to the usual routines.

In fact, I find it very hard to believe that next week is the start of Advent.

Along with all the usual busyness, we have had a number of pastoral concerns.

It's been a tough fall for us as a congregation, with some serious illness for some.

And having four funerals in 8 weeks has been hard on everyone... for those of us who knew and loved Eric Davidson, Margaret MacLennan, Steve Wrin and Georgia Clark it was especially hard.

For those of us who didn't know them for as many years, we still felt their loss to the faith community, and also the pain of those who knew them better.

During those times, the pastoral care team, elders and UCW provided a ministry of presence with food and visits.

The UCW, as always responded with a well organized caring hospitality for funeral receptions.

I just received word last night that Thelma Billard died on Friday night, her funeral arrangements are incomplete, but I do know that it will be held at Snow's funeral home in Clayton Park.

This faith community is blessed beyond measure by our ability to respond to urgent and critical situations with compassion and kindness.

I have observed and heard of a multitude of acts of compassion.

And I don't know about you, but I am tired and grieving.

Friday was the first day off I have had in 20 days.

Yes, I was away last week, doing a different kind of work than pastoral ministry... the work of the national church, without which we collapse and fragment.

And enjoyable and energizing as that work is, it was still work.

What happens to you when you are grieving and tired?

Do you react well to things?

Do things that normally slide right by you irritate and bother you?

Do you sometimes do or say things you regret?

I do.

Some of the advice that I give to families at a funeral is: "be kind and gentle with yourselves and with each other."

Good advice for us as a faith community as well.

There have been times this fall when I have been impatient... and there are times when I have been the recipient of impatience... and there have been times when I have witnessed your impatience with each other.

And I came across this Prayer of Confession yesterday that I would like to share with you. Close your eyes and let the words sink into your Spirit.

*In times of change when all we know is passing away and we don't know what is to come, help us to remember that you are steadfast O God.*

*When we hold tight to what we know and refuse to trust you and your desire for wholeness through new life, help us to remember that you are steadfast O God.*

*When we hold tight to our own lives and won't share them with you, or when we let go of everything and refuse to take responsibility for the life you have given us, help us to remember that you are steadfast O God.*

*Hear our prayers, and give us the courage to hear yours. Amen. (Adapted from a prayer written by Wendy MacLean, printed in Gathering Summer/Autumn 2009, p. 41)*

For those of you who have heard me impatient, please accept my apology, for those who have been impatient with me, I accept yours.

And while impatience while experiencing fatigue and grief is understandable, I don't think it is how any of would like to be with each other.

I would like to propose that we all practice what I learned a couple of weeks ago is called benevolent delusion.

It's a term that comes from the social sciences and is said to be a key determiner of happiness in a relationship or marriage.

This is the way it works: if your husband/wife/partner/significant other is cranky one morning, do you assume that he or she is cranky every morning?

Or because you value the relationship, do you practice benevolent delusion and assume that he or she didn't sleep well and will be back to his or her normal disposition soon.

Benevolent delusion is avoiding relationship destroying words such as 'you always' and 'you never.'

It is thinking the best of each other and valuing the relationships.

And it is communicating directly with each other when we have been hurt by words or actions.

When you have been hurt by someone else, it serves little good to talk to everyone else except the person whom has hurt you.

As one person said at a gathering on Wednesday evening, "Negativity and gossip and rumours will destroy our faith community faster than any financial concerns we have."

There can be no reconciliation and restoration of healthy relationship if we don't talk to one another.

I am not saying it is easy, I find it hard when someone walks into my office and is mad at me, because of something I have said or done, but I think the rewards are worth it.

Sometimes, perhaps even most of the time, all we have to do is listen to each other... because we are not always going to agree with each other.

But I think we can all agree to be kind and gentle with ourselves and with each other.

Let's try it in the coming weeks and see what kind of impact it has on how the faith community interacts with each other.

Remember a few weeks ago I spoke about our relationship being like a marriage?

How the first year is full of excitement and newness...

But... that stage in any relationship passes... and we started to see each other more clearly... in all of our individual and communal foibles and quirks...

How the rose coloured glasses come off and we began to see each other as we truly are...

Even with the rose coloured glasses off, we can still practice benevolent delusion.

And our kindness and gentleness with each other can become part of our pattern of Christian living.

The fatigue and grief this fall has also seemed to cause a fair amount of fear and anxiety... both individually and as a community of faith.

This too is normal.

When people who have been part of this community of faith die, it is natural to look around and wonder how long we can continue.

When our community shrinks it is normal to worry about the future.

When many of you can remember a time when this place was full and there were activities every night of the week, it is normal to be concerned about the days ahead.

What happens when we are fearful and anxious?

We try and cling tightly to what we already know.

You do it, I do it, we do it as a community of faith.

And it can be easy to forget that as a community of faith that our purpose is larger than any one person or group and that Jesus needs to be at the centre of our life together.

This is where the video game comes in.

I am not a video game player... or even much of a TV watcher, I prefer to stick my nose in a book when I have free time.

But I have been introduced to a game called Zuma, which has been quite helpful in relieving stress in that it demands my total attention.

*The objective of Zuma is to eliminate all of the balls rolling around the screen along a given path before these balls reach the yellow skull structure, which will open to varying degrees as a warning of oncoming balls.*

*As soon as one ball reaches the skull, the rest follow and the player loses a life.*

*Each regular game begins with three lives but extra lives are earned with every 50,000 points.*

*Shooting a coin with a ball, making multiple groups of balls explode with a single shot, shooting through gaps in the balls, or finishing a level within a certain period of time will give extra points. (Source – Wikipedia)*

I have become more proficient than I ever thought I would be. But one of the things that I can't do well, or very often, is hit the coin.

The coin moves around during the game and I am so busy aiming at the balls that I forget about the coin, even though it gives me a much higher score than simply hitting the balls.

I sometimes think our life together is like that.

We, and I include myself in this, can get so caught up in our individual projects that we forget that as a community of faith we are first serving Jesus, not our individual projects.

That we have as our purpose something much bigger than our individual projects.

And that we need to keep our eyes firmly fixed on the bigger picture.

That can be hard to do when we are fearful and anxious.

Being afraid is human.

The disciples were often afraid.

Even with Jesus with them, they still experienced fear.

This is apparent in the reading from Matthew.

We enter the story right after the feeding of the 5000.

And it seems that Jesus is tired and needs to spend some time in prayer on the mountain, alone.

So he sends his disciples on ahead of him to the other side of the sea, to us like a large lake, even though it could get stormy and dangerous.

They are to cross by boat, and Jesus will join them later.

They go ahead and the boat gets tossed by the storms and in the middle of the night they see Jesus walking on the water towards them.

And they cry out in terror, thinking it is a ghost!

And Jesus responds with what I think is the key in this passage.

He says, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid."

"Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid."

When we are anxious and afraid, let us use these words as a mantra: "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid."

None of us know what the future holds...

But Jesus is there, saying, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid."

Thanks be to God for Jesus.

Thanks be to God for this faith community. Amen.