

Leap of Faith/Journey of Faith

Psalm 78 – Page 792 Part 1

Philippians 2: 1-13

Matthew 21: 23-32

September 25, 2011 – UM

Rev. Catherine MacDonald

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.

How many of you have recommended a restaurant to a friend or neighbour?

How many have recommended a book or movie you enjoyed?

What about your church?

Research has shown that the best way to grow a church is for those who already attend church to invite someone.

We can have the best worship, the best programs, the best marketing, but nothing grows a church like a personal invitation.

In a couple of weeks, on October 16th to be exact, we are holding what is called Come to Church Sunday.

You are being asked to invite a friend, neighbour or co-worker to come to church that day.

And we have even created an invitation for you to give out, with a space for you to write a personal note.

It outlines 5 reasons that people come to church.

But before you invite someone, I want you to spend some time over the next week, thinking about why YOU come to church?

What is it about this gathering that is important and valuable to you?

Why do you give your time, energy and money to our church and to the wider church?

Ponder those things, have some conversation with others who come here, and spend some time in prayer.

And after that, put it into words?

For many folks, this will be unfamiliar, so here is an idea to make it a little easier.

Take a look at a few of your favourite hymns.

What do the words say?

This, perhaps more than any other exercise I can think of, will tell you what you believe.

Some of you may be moved by the hymns of creation, some by the hymns that lift up our participation in god's world, some by sacrifice, some by the hymns about miracles.

The hymns you love, will tell you what is important to you about your faith.

And then you will be able to tell someone else.

And invite someone else to come and experience for themselves what you have experienced.

Now, I know what you are thinking... I don't know anyone that I might be interested.

But let me ask you this, when you recommend a book, movie or restaurant, do you know if your friend will be interested?

You don't worry about that do you? You simply offer them the opportunity.

That's all we are asking you to do.

Offer someone else the opportunity to experience something you find life giving and enhancing.

At the last Worship Committee meeting, we had a long conversation about what prevents people from inviting friends and neighbours to church.

And we discovered that there is some discomfort around asking someone to come to church.

Discomfort that seemed to be rooted in the fear that you might look like a Bible thumper.

A fear that you would be lumped in with some of what passes for Christianity in the media.

And I don't blame you, I don't want to be part of that group either.

The God I love, the Jesus I learn from, Holy Spirit who empowers me is one who welcomes, who loves, who is grace-filled.

Yes, one who challenges us to be more than what we are now, but doesn't condemn whole groups of people to hell because they don't fit into what is the current societal norms.

So with that as our setting, let's take a look at our readings, what do they say to us in our time and place?

Paul writes from prison, and even there, he praises God and reminds the people of Philippi to be of the same mind as Jesus Christ.

To clothe themselves with compassion, to be generous in spirit, and to live with joy because Jesus lived.

Imagine those encouraging words... words to a young church... a church whose leader was crucified like a common criminal.

I don't often preach on Paul's letters, not because they don't have merit, but because Paul often sounds sanctimonious and holier than thou to me.

He has such a high exalted view of Jesus Christ, that I often find it difficult to see the Jesus I know from the gospels in his letters.

However, in this case, he instructs and encourages the people of Philippi to have the same mind as Jesus.

What does that mean?

To me it means doing our best to live as Jesus modeled: welcoming all.

In our multicultural world, we have a tendency to forget, if we ever knew, just how radical Jesus' welcome for others was in his time and place.

It was perfectly acceptable in that society to exclude others based on gender, health, ethnicity, race, economic status and so on and slavery was normal.

In fact, for years, scripture was used to defend slavery, but there are few in Canada today that would say that this is acceptable.

I think we also have a tendency to forget that in this place, we are not simply gathered with friends and family, but we are gathered in Jesus' name and we are ambassadors for Christ.

In a practical way, this means introducing yourself to someone you might not know... because you never know, that person might be Jesus.

It means that in this place, the greeters speak to each person as they come in, they don't have conversations about church business with other members.

Or they don't catch up with each other's news.

There is a time and a place for both of these, but not in the entryways before worship.

It means that at coffee time, we don't leave newcomers to fend for themselves, in fact, we invite them to coffee time.

You have heard me say, as well as Janet Marshall, our church consultant, that we have about 3 minutes before worship and 3 minutes afterwards to make contact with newcomers.

And it takes so little, a smile, a hello, an offer to sit with them.

Having the same mind as Jesus also means treating each other as we would like to be treated.

Yesterday, Gail Logie, Bonita Grandmaison and I were at a workshop on governance, not the ins and outs of how to run a meeting or the best model, but rather, thinking of our governing body as a community of spiritual leaders and a visioning body.

As we began the morning, which was held at Rockingham United, one of the leaders, Rev. Ross Bartlett, pointed to the Beavers' code of conduct and said that those rules might be good guidelines for the time we spent together.

They were basic: be polite, listen to each other, treat each other with respect and consideration, and one that got a few laughs, don't throw anything. ;-)

These are anxious times for churches, we no longer have our formerly preferred place in the community, going to church isn't the norm any longer and there are many other options for a Sunday morning than church.

We worry about shrinking attendance and increased costs...

We get anxious about change, even when change moves us forward.

We get anxious when someone stops coming to church or decides to limit their involvement for a while.

We get anxious when a new program starts because we knew the old one and our place in it.

Fall has always been my favourite time of the year, but the last few years it has also been a time when our church is anxious.

And that anxiety manifests itself in some folks in their interactions with each other.

I had some conversation with a colleague last week about why we seem to be anxious in September because I couldn't figure out why.

After all, don't we come back refreshed after some time away, don't we come back with new energy and enthusiasm.

I know I do.

But perhaps it is because it is September when we tend to start new programs...

That is also often the time that people decide to start coming to church or decide to change their habits.

Despite the fact that our liturgical year starts in December with Advent, and our calendar year starts in January, for all intents and purposes, our church year starts in September.

And so things change in September and there is anxiety.

And when people are anxious, they don't always behave as their best selves.

This happened last week as we undertook Godly Play as a different way of teaching the Christian stories to our children.

It happened last night after a wonderful concert when I was accosted by someone who was upset when she found the Sanctuary and Social Room not preserved exactly as it used to be.

There is a time and a place to express concerns, and let's choose those wisely.

Some of you remember when I came as your minister... I remember when some of the conversation at my interview and some of the reasons you gave that you called me to be your minister.

One of those is that you believe I had the leadership characteristics to lead United Memorial at this time and place, not the church of the 50s or 60s, not even the church of the 90s, but this church, in the year 2011 with all of its warts and all of its beauty.

We all want this church to grow, to offer Jesus' love and hope and promise of new life.

Offer it to world that is so in need of his message.

Offer it to each other.

So, as Paul wrote in his letter, "Let us clothe ourselves with compassion, to be generous in spirit, and to live with joy because Jesus lived.

And together we will change the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.