

Habits, practices and expectations.

Acts 2: 42-47; John 10: 1-10

As we build the body of Christ in a new way the virtual movement claims us in new ways. How will we find balance with our wants and desires with the expectations of society in this time? What habits have you created that you think will stick? What will change? How will our spiritual Christian practices deepen and help us to find balance as we grow together in love and how will we follow this new way that Jesus has given us? These are the questions that have been running through my mind as we dig deeper into the scriptural passages today.

Many of you know that since September we as a community of space have been engaging in different practices of discipleship and these were based on a book called ‘Power Surge’ by Foss. In it in September we spent the month looking at daily prayer. How do we pray daily is one of the marks of discipleship? Then in October we talked about weekly worship and the importance of being in a faith community and worshipping not only alone but with others. We talked in November about the importance of reading scripture and digging deeper into the scriptures that provide us with our learnings and our understandings of our faith. Then in December we diverged a little bit from Foss, and we added our own, which was taking time to discern and listen to discern and listen for the spirit and where the spirit is calling us as a faith community. Then in January and February we spent time looking at what it means to serve how do we serve others as Jesus served us. Then in Lent, in March and part of April we explored the importance of spiritual friendship and finally in April we spent some time thinking about giving. How is it that we give what is it we share with one another as people of faith.

This month though we wanted to explore the importance of balance and wholeness. How do we bring all those things into balance? This all began when we reflected on the words from a song of faith which is one of the creedal statements of the United Church of Canada that said:

“We are called together by Christ as broken but hopeful believers loving what he loved living what he taught and striving to be faithful servants of God in our time and space the church requires the spirit to reorient it helping it to live an emerging faith while honoring tradition challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement for we are called to be a blessing to the earth.”¹

¹ *A Song of Faith*, The United Church of Canada, 2006.

In the passage from Acts that was read today it begins with one verse that says “They devoted themselves to the apostle teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” We are reminded in the gospel of John that Jesus came so that we may have life and have it abundantly. After Jesus had appeared to the disciples, post resurrection, things started to become clear. It was now up to them to share the good news with people. They realized what they needed to do because Jesus was no longer with them in the flesh. They learned that they needed to share what they had in common with one another. It's interesting in this passage from acts because when we hear that the Christian communities that came together and started sharing everything they had in common with one another we often get caught in this vision of the early church and we start to feel guilty. We start to feel like we have failed because we are not living in this way, but we need to remember but this was the early church, this was not the final model of a church though there are some communities who live intentionally in this way in our world. As a faith community, as Robertson-Wesley we need to focus our attention on what built the faith of the early church in the beginning. The first verse of act suggests that there are four habits or priorities that nurture the lives of Christians and as a church they dedicated themselves to these four priorities.

Number one was teaching; they knew that now as disciples as the people of faith out in the world that we need to continue to explore the text and dwell in the scriptures. How do these words, these stories, these teachings help us to help one another? What is it we here in these scriptures that inspire us and bring us hope in this world?

The second thing was fellowship, and this is something Robertson-Wesley is good at. We love to gather as the people of God to share and feast with one another, but fellowship in this sense in the early tradition of the church was about quality friendship and the effort that people took to include others. The point of fellowship is to nurture habits of hospitality, radical hospitality not just bringing in the people we like but learning to truly extend what we have to all people, strangers and enemies alike. We need to get over our fear and take the initiative to notice someone new, to notice someone who is isolated or off on their own someone who is not well someone who needs something. We need to take the initiative to invite people to join us whether we're going for a meal. Maybe we need to take the initiative to phone someone that we don't know very well and, as I said this is not easy, but this is truly radical fellowship that Jesus is calling us to. And it takes creativity to start a regular gathering of some sort. Now you all know we are gathering in different ways and so continue to think about that as we talk through this is that when we gather, we don't need to physically gather together, but we can virtually gather together.

The third thing that they talked about was breaking of bread. We need to explore the ritual that Jesus gave us and to remember what is truly being offered to us in the breaking of bread and the drinking of the wine. Christ's broken body and blood was shed so that we could have abundant life. What does that look like for us?

And finally, they spent time focusing on prayer. Prayer is the opportunity for us to commune with God, to be in dialogue with God, to share our thoughts or feelings our hopes or fears with God and then to listen; listen to the message that God has for us. And friends there are a variety of ways to pray. There is no one right or wrong way of doing it. There are times when we do it individually and times when we do it as a gathered community. There are times when we do it in the form of meditation, sometimes in the form of singing or dancing, sometimes in art. Prayer can be done in a myriad of ways.

Now thinking about those four priorities that were mentioned in Acts do you notice any similarities of what we've been focusing on at Robertson-Wesley this year? The marks of discipleship. In some of the small Zoom gatherings this past week I've been inviting people to reflect on how this pandemic has challenged and strengthened your faith. I've also invited people to explore what the role of the church is now in this time. That is something that all communities of faith have faced is understanding what their call is in this time and place. Just because we are isolated in our homes and are trying to protect one another does not mean that we are still called by God to reach out in this community and be the church.

It's interesting because in my studies a lot of people have talked about how North America doesn't have the same urgency for faith as some of our third world countries. Partly because we live a pretty safe life. We have most of our needs met. That isn't true across the board, but there isn't that same sense of urgency. We aren't facing violence and poverty as much as some other countries are. And often when in that place of urgency where we feel like we have no control over our lives or what is happening we turn to something outside of ourselves, we turn to faith, to God. This is a time like that; something that many of us have never experienced. Being told what we can and cannot do and being restricted in what we would normally do in our lives can make us feel uncertain, full of anxiety, fearful, overwhelmed and we have noticed that there has been a bit of a surge in reaching out in faith.

Like the early church in the time that Luke was writing in the passage from Acts, the early church was growing quite fast. Our viewership has been growing quite fast over the last little while. Some people have been asking, 'Do you know how many people are watching us?' We don't truly know, but we have a sense that we're doubling and tripling sometimes our viewership. Which is exciting. I'm not sure how that equates to how we are truly living out the spirit and the message and mission of the church out in the world, but it is an indication that people are seeking something beyond themselves, something that we offer. We've also seen that many people are returning, like the sheep going back and following the shepherds voice. Some people reflected that the reason this might be happening is because, virtually, you don't have to worry about getting cornered by someone in the church, sitting in the wrong pew and upsetting somebody and there's a lot less fear that people are going to notice that you don't know what you're doing. There's a lot less anxiety because you don't know anyone, but no one knows that you don't know anyone. The safe distancing for a lot of people and that's really great, it's a great opportunity for

people to become more comfortable with the way we do things, what we believe, how we share, how we pray, how we sing together.

We are truly being shepherded in this time. One person reflected that they do feel like they're being shepherded through all these online things throughout the week that our faith is in the forefront more and more everyday. What I found fascinating was when people were telling me that, and they didn't use these words, but people are becoming evangelists in the United Church of Canada. This is not normal it's exciting though. Not in the traditional way where we tell you what you are to believe. What we're doing is inviting and sharing with other messages that we received that have inspired us, brought us comfort, challenged us. So, people are sharing some of the live things, people are sharing some of the articles that we've been writing in our E news to help other people who are feeling a little lost and alone. like the lost sheep of the world or maybe the bandits who are trying to get into the sheepfold. So, though we aren't literally feeding the community that surrounds us we are offering spiritual nourishment, the kind that Jesus offered the disciples, the living water where we will no longer be thirsty, the bread and wine that feeds our souls.

Molly T Marshall a theologian writes, “Recovering the shepherding imagery could call the church to simplicity, sacrifice and solidarity which is needed in a time when many have lost their way.”² Friends the role of the church remains. It's a touchpoint. It is a way that we can come together to rest, to learn, to reconnect, to be inspired and to change our ways. The role of the church is to be a voice in this world that models and advocates for equality, compassion, love and acceptance of all. Friends we are seeking ways to be more inclusive and I think the virtual world has allowed us to do that, but we don't want to do it if we end up excluding others and so we like so many churches have had to find a variety of ways of reaching out. Whether we send written sermons to people who don't have the internet, whether one friend calls another friend who has the internet and they listen together through the phone as the service is happening. There are a lot of creative ways that we can reach out and share with one another the good news. And as we prepare to engage in the sacrament of communion today, take time to reflect on how you are a part of this faith community and how you are sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

How well are you doing on the marks of discipleship? Are you praying? Are you worshipping? Are you exploring your faith through scripture? Are you serving others? Are you giving of yourself? Are you a spiritual friend to someone? I know and trust that you are all doing this and you're probably your own worst critic saying you're not doing in that and yet I know that every little bit counts. It doesn't matter how small or large the offering is, every piece is just as important. So, know that in this time some of you might be in a space where you need to be nourished, some of you might feel so nourished that you can then reach out to nourish others. Wherever you are, Jesus is the Shepherd; calling us by name, knowing us for who we are, loving

² Molly T. Marshall, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 446.

us for who we are, and offering us abundant life. This abundant life comes when we remember to forgive, when we offer grace, when we love one another as we would be loved. So, let us prepare ourselves for communion as we sing together 'Christ Be Our Host' which is Voices United number 465.