

Soak up all the blessings of the world

Jeremiah 17: 5-8; John 15: 1-17

On this day we will feast together and remember. We are called to remember who we are and whose we are. And we give thanks to God for all that we have received from the love of Christ. The Last Supper was an important and pivotal time for Jesus and the disciples. Jesus wanted to mark the occasion with a ritual that would provide the disciples with a way to remember, a way to gather and a way to receive comfort and strength in the times that lay ahead. Jesus knew that he was leaving and that their time together was ending. Closure is hard. It's not something any of us really enjoy because it comes with sadness, loss, and grief. Jesus said, 'This is my commandment: That you love one another as I have loved you and no one has greater love than this, but to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my creator. You did not choose me, but I chose you and I have appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.' In these words that Jesus spoke to the disciples and in the ritual of feasting on bread and wine in communion with one another comes great assurance. Though Christ will soon leave the disciples he chooses to move into a mutual relationship of spiritual friendship; no longer is he master and teacher and no longer are the disciples slaves or pupils. In this moment Jesus invited the disciples to move into a new space of mutual love and respect and responsibility. These friendships are the most formative. A true friend who loves as God loves will in time teach us how to love as God loves.

Communion or Koinonia, the word in Greek, can be understood as partnership from biblical and theological perspectives. It includes the sharing of human resources, material goods, communal fellowship. Koinonia means that the church is called to a commitment of solidarity towards unity as witness in a broken and divided world. Sharing in God's mission requires the proclamation of a liberating word and a concrete manifestation of a communal fellowship in worship and the caring for God's creation. We're called by God and Jesus to witness brokenness and the divided world. We are being called to abide and to take root, to endure and to stay in this new place to remain close to the vine so that we bear the fruit of discipleship. What does that mean for us today?

As I've been reflecting on this year and on my time here at Robertson-Wesley what has suddenly become clear to me is that we have all moved into a liminal space. What's liminal space you

might ask? A liminal space is defined as relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process. It's about occupying a position on both sides of a boundary or threshold. It is the space between, betwixt. Transitional experiences follow a predictable pattern that involves separation, liminality and then reorientation. As a faith community we moved into a new way of working together starting back in 2009. The congregation wanted to find a way to work together that empowered more people to participate, to share their gifts in the mission and ministry of the church. As a wider church the United Church of Canada restructured from a four court system to a three court system also, to change how we govern ourselves, seeking to reduce the work that was redundant, seeking ways to empower the individual faith communities to really meet the needs of their individual contexts. And now as a world we too are moving into a liminal space that started with Covid, which led us to a call for systemic change in all institutions in the call for justice. There's a lot of change to engage and it can best be described as feeling like uncertainty. Fear of the unknown, lack of control, loss of direction; it feels chaotic. Reverend Susan Beaumont writes, 'Liminality fuel's ambiguity and disorientation.' and she goes on further to say that 'God's greatest work occurs in liminal space.'

What the scriptures are inviting us to remember today is that this is an invitation to transformation. This is a time in our history in the world for God to work on us. This is a time of great learning which by its nature can lead to disorientation. But when we turn to the passage from Jeremiah and the imagery of the tree planted by water in concert with the image of pruning a vine we are provided with hope and comfort that even during a year of drought, even during a year of Covid we do not need to be anxious, we do not need to live in fear for we will continue to bear fruit because God is with us, Jesus is with us. Even when a new branch is producing fruit a vine grower needs to prune that branch so that and say three years time it will produce even more fruit and be better tasting fruit. Pruning something that is living goes against our very nature. We don't want to destroy something that is producing. With that in mind I reflect that it's been hard, it's been hard to take when Covid first hit, when we were told to stay home from all that gave us life. It was hard to take when Covid continued and continues to continue that we can't get back to our outreach projects here at the church. And it's been hard to take when Covid hit that we were not able to see, touch, hug, eat with our family and our friends. It has led us to wonder what is our purpose? What is the role of the church in this time and what are we to do?

In the discussion that God on Tap the other week we explored some of these questions. What is God up to in this moment? Here's some of the responses from our group. It's a natural check, time for us to kind of check where we're at, God is asking us to truly love one another, to be open and respect each other, God is asking us to see something different, to really notice the economic diversity that exists, the lack in care for our elderly the injustices that surround so much of our world. God is also asking us to take responsibility for our choices. God's calling us back to seeing that we are stewards of all creation and that calls us to care for create creation rather than dominate it. God is pushing us to see the collective power we all have in community. God is calling us to recognize the urgency of this time globally, to shift all of these in inequalities.

Unlike the moments of creation in Genesis when God looked around and said this is good, the words that I keep hearing in my head and God said here's another opportunity for you. But an opportunity for what? The gospel reading makes it very clear that we are called to bear fruit; what is the fruit we are being called to bear? Is it simply a matter of love? Are we being called to bear fruit in words and actions of love? The answer is yes, and we are being called to do it in communion with one another. In the Bible translation called The Message, it shared some of the words we heard earlier in a different way. It says, 'live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you.' Jesus is inviting us to find our hearts true home in Jesus. And Jesus is offering us more than a simple way to hang on in difficult times. Jesus is offering us shalom. When we abide in Jesus, we enter that place of shalom and it's a place of hope, it's a place of love and a place of healing. It's a place where we can find relief from suffering. Or we receive God's strength when we abide in God. So, the question we need to ask ourselves is why are we resisting what is being offered to us this day? Why do we resist transformation? What is being pruned in this time apart and what will be given more resources to grow when we do some pruning? Jesus is the vine that connects us and his command that we love one another should not be seen as a demand, but rather an invitation; to live life to the fullest. Friends we have not lost our connection since Covid began because we abide in Jesus and because God is working on us, nourishing us, and making us ready to bear fruit.

As we prepare to open the sanctuary up to people again I remind us not to look at this as a new beginning, in a sense what we are doing is moving into this liminal time, a symbolic walking into the liminal space. We need to see this stepping in as a way to let go of our personal needs and our egos and instead embrace the collective wisdom. This is a true time of great learning and experimentation. We're being given the opportunity invited into this opportunity to take risks, to try new things, to be creative to be daring and curious. I invite us today to hear the words, 'and God saw that it was good,' instead to hear, 'God is providing us with a new opportunity' and that we are not to rush across the threshold of this liminal time but rather to dwell, abide in it. This will take great patience and courage. And it will be a time that bears much fruit for the years to come if we put our trust in God. Go out into this world abiding in Jesus and abiding in the love of God knowing that we are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.