

A future beyond imagining.

Revelations 7:9-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

A future good beyond imagining.

November is Gratitude month and a month to remember. We are called to remember the people who have come before us, we are called to remember what Jesus taught and how his life changed the world as we know it. We are called to remember whose we are, that we are all God's children. Taking time to remember is one way that we practice gratitude, honour and reflect and come to new understandings about who we are today in this time and place.

We give thanks today to our ancestors who built this beautiful church which gathered people to give thanks to God. Who had faith that even though this building was on the edge of the city that it would be a place of faith for many years to come, over 100 in fact. We give thanks today to the people of faith who had the courage to amalgamate Robertson United and Wesley United. Who trusted that by selling Wesley United Church that there would be fund available to reach out to people in need in our community and the world. In January we will be celebrating the 50th Anniversary of key decision in the history of R-W. We give thanks for the wisdom of the leadership and the property committee who pushed to get our historical designation as a church which has provided us with resources to ensure that this building will be a place of welcome, inclusion, safety, and refuge for generations to come. We give thanks for the bold decision to become an Affirming Church which is now a part of our fabric of identity. We give thanks for the Spritely Spirit in this place which inspires the people to be bold, to take risks, to be edgy while honouring and holding onto tradition. A spirit that inspires us to live faithfully in the world. This is but a small list of the legacy that has made R-W what it is today.

There is wisdom in looking back in history to see where we have come from, to know where we are today so that we can imagine and discern where we are to go in the future.

Today is the day we celebrate All Saints Day, a day where as Christians we celebrate the contribution of the saints of the church especially those who do not have a special day named in their honor. These saints both known and unknown are people who have committed their lives to Christ's ministries even at the cost of life itself.

We proclaim, in *A Song of Faith* – the most recent United Church Creedal statement, how we as a people of faith see our connection to the saints who have come before, and to the legacy that

has been given to us, providing us with the resources to continue the ministry and mission of God. This section, that I will read in a moment, from *A Song of Faith* reminds us that we are called into community and that we are not alone. We are called to learn from the saints, and the mentors who have come before and build upon the foundation they have created.

We proclaim:

“We sing of a church seeking to continue the story of Jesus by embodying Christ’s presence in the world. We are called together by Christ as a community of broken but hopeful believers, loving what he loved, living what he taught, striving to be faithful servants of God in our time and place. Our ancestors in faith bequeath to us experiences of their faithful living; upon their lives our lives are built. Our living of the gospel makes us a part of this communion of saints, experiencing the fulfillment of God’s reign even as we actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth.”

How are we living out the gospel today and what legacy will we leave for those who are yet to come?

Each year the gratitude team comes up with a theme to explore what it means to answer the call of stewardship. As faithful stewards of Christ we are called to live a life of gratitude, to follow in the footsteps of Christ and to answer the call of servanthood that Jesus role modelled for us. Paul in the letter to the Thessalonians explains that like a loving parent, he and the other apostles have continued to urge and encourage the people of Thessalonica to lead a life worthy of God. Paul invites us to act out of the grace that we have received.

He believes that we need to “love people for who they are and try our best to do what is holy.”

Grace Ji-Sun Kim explains that:

“This is a difficult calling to fulfill, but God’s word is at work with in us and can transform us to live a holy life. To be worthy of God, we must live in intimacy with God, which is secured through Christ. Jesus is God, and we can foster a fellowship with God through Jesus.”¹

It is a call to commitment and faithfulness. How do we lead a life worthy of God? If we distill the answer to this question down to its essence, we will lead a life worthy of God through the power of love. Acts of unconditional love not only make a difference in the present, but they pay it forward.

During COVID living out our faith has changed. We seek to find ways to reach out to the community in need while keeping people safe by not gathering. We seek new and wonderful ways to meet the needs of the people who do not have the ability to connect online and virtually. We seek new and wonderful ways to reach out to each other in our isolation. We must trust that there is hope for the future even when we do not know the way forward.

The book of Revelations has often been a book that people believe was written to scare us. It talks of end times. But Revelations was not written to scare people but rather to comfort them. The book of Revelations addresses a social historical situation foreign to most first world

¹ Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 256

people: it was written in a time that was truly a dire situation of severe political oppression and martyrdom. The text speaks of end times with images that are violent, disruptive, frightening and disorientating. And yet in today's passage we hear the song of the saints, who sing of the Good news of God's final word. In their singing they pay God's good word forward. They sing of courage to live in the present while always facing the future. Saints from every nation listen and sing, and God keeps hope alive in our world. This great multitude serves God day and night in God's temple, and it is God who will spread a tent over them. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. When we approach this passage with a visionary's imagination it will inspire hope for a better world. A future beyond imagining.

The ***Back to the Future*** movie trilogy is the inspiration for this year's Gratitude Theme, "One more step...back into the future." The movie *Back to the Future*, is about time travel which was invented by Dr. Brown. He longed to go into the future and see what was to come, but before he gets the chance, there was a snafu and instead, he ends up getting shot, and his young friend named Marty ends us back in the past, where he meets Dr. Brown on the day when he first discovers how to travel through time with the help of the flux capacitor. The first movie in the trilogy is the story of how Marty encounters his family when they were his age, (a teenager). It explores what would happen if we altered events from the past and the impact it could potentially have on the future. What I love about this movie is how Marty discovers the truth about his parents, that they aren't as pure and well behaved as they make themselves out to be. Marty has to work hard to undo the changes to the past that were made because of his presence and some of his choices. And in the end when he manages to get back to the present. And inevitable things are not quite the same as they once were -- in fact things have changed for the better.

There is no doubt that we have all had moments in the past year where we wish we could predict what the future holds, and especially in the coming week. But what this liminal time is inviting us to do instead, is to reflect on the truth of the past, to truly understand the present, so that we can prepare and be ready for what the future holds.

We must be careful in this process of reflection and the honouring of the past for what can happen, according to Rev. Susan Beaumont, is that:

"In the absence of meaning and purpose, people become fearful. Fearful people will attach themselves to anyone who promises to reduce their anxiety. Often, this involves attachment to one who promises a return to the past – a promise to restore the glory days of the institution, without thinking critically about the ills of that era."² P. 113.

In this month of gratitude at R-W and we begin by exploring the legacy left to us. We will explore what our purpose is and what we value and how our decisions, our action, our faith will reflect a life worthy of God.

² Rev. Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going; Leading in a Liminal Season.*, p. 113.

Today on All Saints Sunday we rejoice and give thanks for all who have served in this faith community. In looking at what makes someone a saint, here are some of the qualities that are most often attributed to saints: They are excellent role models; They are unusually good at teaching people to live lives of goodness; They act as channel's of God's power; They are intercessors; They are generous and unselfish; They are holy and are able to interpret God & holiness for others. There are many well-known saints from long ago, and from modern times, St. Joan of Arc, Mother Teresa, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg to name a small few.

These are people acted out of the power of love! What can we learn from the saints in our life and in the life of Robertson-Wesley, that will help us to lead a life worthy of God? How will this inspire our imagination as we look back into the future?

I asked some people at R-W to share with me the names of people they thought are saints at R-W: Bill Hamilton, Janet Hughes, George Ford, Don Milne, Heather Laing, Charlie Nash. These are people who inspired others to get involved, to reach out to those in need, who deepened our understanding of God and what we believe. I know that each of you would have your own answer to this question. I hope that you will lift them up in prayer today. Ask yourself how did they live a life worthy of God? And then take time to reflect on how you choose to live a life worthy of God.

What we choose to do today as a faith community will have an impact on those who come next. In this challenging time, trust that God will wipe away our tears, trust that God will shelter us, and take one more step back into the future through generous acts of love! Through love we will make a difference in this world and we will lead a life worthy of God's call. Thanks be to God.