

20 September

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Last week it seemed that the readings pointed us toward the things that make community: Forgiveness, harmony, and humility, which are, in fact, elements of one thing: Love.

The readings for this Sunday point us in another direction, where we see in them things that threaten community: disappointed expectations, suffering, and resentment.

Part of me wants to say, “Enough said!” Been there, done that, earned the t-shirt. Suffering is a constant theme in our journey through the annual calendar kept in our ‘neck’ of church-world.

I also feel a connection to the danger these things pose to community. I believe that the experience of the last six months of trying to live safely in the midst of the pandemic have shown us plenty about disappointed expectations, suffering and resentment.

Disappointed expectations – in the North we are so used to our exceptional health care that we expect instant cures. Why should vaccines take so long? Why can’t we go back to life ‘as usual’ yet?

Suffering – some suffering the virus and its consequences; some suffering job loss and business closures; some suffering the increased demands of working from home at the same time as having children at home in need of attention, help and comfort; being separated from loved ones who are in shut-down residences, living in those residences and not understanding the changes all around because age or dementia has stolen memory . . . the list goes on.

Resentment – from the resentment that comes from not having things the way we want them to be, to the greater resentment we've seen unleashed as the realities of inequity due to race and colour have been dramatically illustrated by the effects of COVID 19, a resentment and anger often leading to violence.

We watch as neighbourhoods and cities disintegrate in the face of these community-threatening elements. We watch the coming US election wondering if an entire country will disintegrate before our eyes, and what that will mean for us, are we prepared?

Perhaps the most overwhelming thing we've experienced is just how unprepared we were, from private citizen to government leaders. Perhaps we are more vulnerable and insecure right now than we have been in a very long time.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we heard that, in response to the runaway slaves' resentments, the Holy One both provided for their real needs and set limitations to their 'allowance' so that they would be forced to live with the truth that they must depend on Gd for their provision. What a stark reminder to every generation who read the story about the Gospel truth that everything we have comes to us from Gd, who can as easily withhold as give.

In the Gospel Jesus' parable speaks to the expectations that life be 'fair,' including rewards and recognitions for those who have held the course longer than others. Rather than a scale of 'fairness' Gd operates on a scale of generosity – and the parable shows us how easily we resent such generosity when it is given to others.

And Paul reveals the tug-of-war in his own life between his desire to be with Christ and his desire to see the communities he has served continue to be strong and steadfast, so that if he is to continue in ministry with his life, then he would have it so. He knows that suffering for Christ is not the death of faith: it is the place where grace is made real as we hold on to our trust in Gd's life-giving love.

Times like these are the times where our faith is given the opportunity to shine stronger. We have seen it in the new ways St. Alban's Outreach & Advocacy teams have discovered and responded to new opportunities to serve the growing number of people in need of food and life-making connection. Volunteers tell us stories of how they see hope and new life because of the food they are able to share with them. Others have been constant in their care of this place – largely unseen – so that all our core ministries can continue.

So, what is the Spirit saying to you and me this morning?

I struggle with disappointed expectations and resentment. I don't know if I would say I am suffering – how can I when I am still employed and have food and a home? Yet there is a kind of suffering in not being able to sit at a table with my good friends whose friendship has been a help and support for years. Our phone conversations and emails feel so inadequate. Being unable to be with my sister to clean out our father's house is a constant 'burden.'

There is a suffering in feeling our own inadequacies – and perhaps this is when the light of Christ shines in to remind us that where we are carrying burdens, we do not carry them alone.

The side of faith that is the Light of Christ sets before us the vision that times like these are times of new possibilities that can lead to new life with Gd's help, when the people of Gd remember to trust in Gd, remember that it is the Holy One who can still do more than we can ask or imagine. Gd's wonderful works arise out of times of suffering and challenge, insecurity and vulnerability because these are times that can force us to let go and turn back to the source of true life.

O give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name;
make his deeds known among the peoples and
sing the praises of the Lord, tell of all Gd's wonderful works.

Glory in the presence of the Lord,
Seek Gd's help, who gives to who call upon Gd,
Remember the good things Gd has done and rejoice
For the Holy One shall lift up all who call upon Gd,
Turning fears into laughter and weakness into strength,
Saving us from death and restoring us to life everlasting.

Alleluia!

(rif on Ps. 105 v.1-5/ppl)

Paula Porter Leggett/19 September 2020