

GOING WHERE WE'VE NEVER GONE BEFORE

Acts 10: 1-36, 44-48

Before coming to Armour Heights, I served another church in Toronto called St. Mark's. I was in my early 30s when I started ministry there and even though I was still very young, I thought I knew a few things after having served another congregation before that. But there was lots I still had to learn. And one of the biggest lessons was that even though I was being called to lead the congregation, leading was not an accurate word for what I was really being called to do. Rather, if there was any leading I was to do, it was all about responding to the leading of some other force – call it the Holy Spirit.

Responding and saying yes is very different than simply leading with your own ideas. Things happen and opportunities arise. Situations happen and possibilities arise, possibilities never imagined even by the most creative thinking. The question always is: how will I and we respond? Will we say yes? Or will we say: no, not at this time. Saying no is safe. Saying no buys us more time if we think we actually have time before an opportunity is gone. Saying no will keep things comfortable and less disruptive too. I mean, life is disruptive enough and that includes any community organization like a church. But what are the consequences of saying no? How many churches around us are closing down or, if not closing, diminishing and losing spirit?

Now I speak this way with much compassion in my heart, especially for those in congregations diminishing or closing. I feel very fortunate to be here at Armour Heights. But if I hadn't learned the lessons I learned in my early years at St. Mark's, I would not have had the clarity and vision needed to lead here at Armour Heights. "OK" you may be thinking. "What exactly are you talking about Harris?"

Let me begin by describing something that happened within my first year of ministry at St. Mark's. There was a senior elder in the congregation who really shook things up for us all. He had a daughter who was a single mom in the area, and as an engaged grandfather he really tried to involve himself in the life of his granddaughter. Well before any summertime, he would try to register her for any summer programs offered within the community. To get into a summer camp program offered by the city, you had to get in line super early on the first day and wait for as long as it took, hoping for a spot. Once all the spots were filled, you were out of luck. This elder was super frustrated, and he felt for all those parents with limited financial means to send their kids to a private camp. And so, he challenged us as a church. What were we doing in our community to address this challenge for so many parents and also for many new Canadians populating the area around the church?

We had a robust Christian Education committee and a part-time CE worker with lots of creative energy. But was this enough? How could we run a summer camp throughout the summer with our little experience. I, for one, was overwhelmed. This was just not possible. We could support others doing this, maybe even partner with someone and take a few years to develop a program, find sources of funding, get insurance, staff it properly and effectively, and the many other requirements for establishing a solid summer camp.

And my feeling of overwhelm was definitely also shared by others. And yet, in the end, we just went for it! People committed huge amounts of time and effort. We consulted many people, we found funding and people dug into their own pockets too. Eventually we also drew in partners from other churches around the area and Footprints Summer Day Camp was born. 24 years later it is still operating.

The camp not only provided subsidized camping for children in the community. It also built community. There were volunteers. There was an ecumenical board which I ended up chairing. There was a diversity of children, many of whom started attending the church through the rest of the year, including some of their parents. There were youth employed with great summer jobs and learning, as well as an LIT program. I can't tell you how many reference letters for young people I've written over the years. Many of those young people employed by the camp went on into education and careers working with children. The camp was a gift that has kept on giving.

And for the congregation it also meant building identity around a project like this. From bigger projects to smaller ones supporting individuals and groups, families in search of housing and subsidized care for their children, and seniors in search of community and belonging, practice in saying yes and going for it only fed greater confidence and energy in going for it the next time.

OK, so did any of this have anything to do with my leadership or vision? Or was there another force at play which also got under my skin and the skin of others? To help us explore such a question let's dive into our scripture reading from Acts.

The book of Acts tells the story of the 30 years after Jesus' resurrection. It tells the story of how the small group of Jesus followers grow to become his hands, feet, voice and heart, building community with each other and spreading compassion in the world. But little did they ever imagine where they would be taken. The way the story is composed years later as we have it, it is clear that steering the ship of this movement were not leaders like Peter or Paul, but the Holy Spirit of Jesus. And the story in our reading this morning gives us a glimpse into how Peter exercised his leadership under the greater leading of the Holy Spirit.

Peter, like other early Christians, were Jews. They were faithful Jews. As followers of Jesus they continued to worship in the temple, practice all the commandments and the day to day rituals

taught in their scriptures. Being a faithful Jew and a faithful follower of Jesus were connected. This also meant that being a Jew and being a non-Jew were not the same. They were different. So how would that divide be bridged? What change would be required? What risks would have to be taken? What challenges and even losses would have to be worked through? Who decided the timing?

The way the story is told in our reading, Peter is being pushed and pulled into deeply uncharted waters. Not only are his day to day rituals of how he eats and who he associates with getting challenged, but he will be confronted by the last kind of person he would ever want to associate with – an official in the Roman army, a person who represents everything despicable to his people. Cornelius and his kind are the oppressors of Peter and his people. Whether it was Egypt long ago, and later the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now Rome with Herod and the Jewish aristocracy doing their dirty work... What must Peter have to traverse to get from where he is to where the Holy Spirit is pulling and pushing him to go?

It starts with animals, and the animals, Peter comes to realize, represent all of creation. All of it is sacred to God. Nothing is unclean. All may serve as holy nourishment for body and spirit. All are potential temples through whom the Holy Spirit can manifest. Being unclean or being an enemy is a human construct out of a poisoned heart. Isn't that something?

But how to get from there to here? What about the timing? It's all happening so fast! Cornelius gets a vision. Then the scene shifts to Peter having a vision. Then there are multiple meetings. And before Peter has fully absorbed it all, he is being asked to address a newly formed congregation of family and friends gathered in what would have been deemed a contaminated gentile home of a Roman army officer! Can you believe it? Peter scarcely can. But then it comes to him as a revelation what he must say. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all." Imagine Peter speaking these words to a senior Roman officer! Everyone in that world knows about the Pax Romana or the peace Rome has supposedly brought into the world. Everyone in that world also knows that the only person who is called Lord of all is Caesar! Imagine calling a crucified peasant of a colonized people not only the source of true peace, but one even greater than Caesar and truly Lord of all!

For all Peter's challenge of embracing Cornelius and his kind into the fellowship of Jesus, Cornelius must embrace Jesus as truly Lord of all. And Cornelius must embrace Christ's peace as genuine peace and still remain a loyal soldier and commander. Is this possible? It cannot be! And yet, the way the story is told, it is the Holy Spirit taking them all into places they could never imagine going in a million years! Wow!

OK, so how do we bring all this back to us here today at Armour Heights two thousand years later in a world and context so different? Well, Armour Heights has a history of moving into unchartered territory. And let me speak of the last six+ years since I've been here as this is what I know best. A few months ago I introduced a statement of purpose for our congregation. It's at the end of the bulletin every Sunday. Did I invent this, adapted from the bible? Or did it dawn on me after witnessing what the Holy Spirit has been pushing and pulling us to do over these past 6+ years? We have been called to become the hands, feet, voice and heart of Christ for each other and in the world.

So then, let me end this sermon by highlighting eight ways I believe the Holy Spirit has pushed and pulled us into saying yes... The first 4 are about community:

1. First, there is making our community and fellowship ever more accessible and inclusive... After my first year here we were challenged to think about ministry here all year round, which includes summer time. This meant major investment in climate control and a full choir through the summer. We realized that once we made this space fully comfortable even in hot humid summertime weather, and once we signalled that we were putting everything into our worship and programming through the summer as much as the rest of the year, people would also participate more fully. And so, summer, for us has become a time to welcome many new people, many visiting and many of us who continue to grow in our worship experience here.
2. We also invested a lot of money in tech upgrades, beginning with our sound systems in the sanctuary and in our halls with a giant screen too. Once again, we came to realize if we build community space for programming and quality sound, we will also signal our welcome for community to grow.
3. Our sound tech upgrades only set us up to pivot beautifully during the scourge that was Covid. And with the gift of new people joining us online, adding to those already with us before Covid, we grew our congregation, and continued to upgrade our tech capabilities with quality livestreaming and zoom programming. Without our experience of having learned to say yes to the Spirit's prodding, we would have remained stuck like a deer facing headlights, the situation of all too many congregations. Our experience was so different because the flow of the Spirit was among us and we were practiced in saying yes – let's go for it.
4. And now that we have emerged out of Covid, we have said yes to becoming a fully hybrid community. The full meaning of that is still being worked out, and like Peter with Cornelius, seeing the Spirit come upon Gentiles just as much as it had come upon Jews was only the beginning of the work of forming mixed communities with multiple needs and perspectives. Saying yes to the Spirit is only the beginning of our figuring out all that our yes means in continuing to build community in ways we could never imagine doing it before.

But just as important as becoming Christ for each other in community, is reaching out as Christ's love into the world. Here are 4 ways we have begun to say yes to the Spirit's leading:

1. Within my first year here, we were challenged to welcome the ministry called ARISE within our property, something we had never done before. ARISE is the kind of ministry, working with women exploited by human trafficking, that would not naturally fit into an up-scale neighbourhood around the church. And yet, after much discussion over several months, we felt compelled by the Spirit to say yes. And what a witness for us within the wider community!

2. Also, even as Armour Heights had been LGBTQ2S inclusive for decades, over the past few years we have decided to become ever more loud and proud in our inclusivity. We committed ourselves to learning what it means to be an inclusive and safe community for all and how to demonstrate our inclusivity with our rainbow benches and our participation in the PRIDE parade with the largest number of participants of any congregation. Our learning and witness will only keep growing here.

3. Another way we were confronted by the Spirit was after the official discovery of unmarked graves of indigenous children in Kamloops, BC a few years ago. The shock of this finding did not send us to bury our heads in the sand, but to set up a working group and begin the hard work of learning our history, building relationships and supporting indigenous projects toward healing, something that will continue well into the future.

4. And finally, over the past number of years, and through circumstances no one could foresee, we have engaged in supporting refugees from places like Iran, Africa and Afghanistan, another area of witness that will continue to grow among us into the future. How we support various refugees varies with the circumstances, and we continue to discern how best to do this.

So much more can be said, but I must bring this sermon to a close. What has become ever more clear for me personally, and after this deep dive into the book of Acts too, is that if the Holy Spirit does not inspire, provoke, shake us, awaken us and strengthen us to become the extension of Christ for each other and in the world in some way, it will not happen. If it leads to blessing and growth, it is the Spirit who leads. Our task is to say yes and then figure out how we will make it. May this spirit of adventure for us as a congregation continue to flourish.

Come, Holy Spirit, come... Keep taking us into places we have never gone before! Amen.