

Reflection for April 26, 2020 – A Pandemic Spirit Spark?

Based on Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Prayer:

In the early days after Jesus' death, there were not many who identified themselves as belonging to the "New Way" as it was called. In fact, it is said that there were only 120 believers at the time Peter delivered his speech I read for us. And so, the 3,000 that wanted to be baptized that day is rather incredible. Think of that, from 120 to 3,000 in a single day! I doubt that even with the internet and our Zoom meeting format, our congregation can go from our 60ish to even 600 that fast. I wonder if perhaps my sermon reflections are not really reaching out like I would hope? What am I, what are we not doing?

It might be helpful for us first to understand some of the background around this reading. According to Luke (the author of Acts), this is the day of Pentecost which we traditionally celebrate in late May. Earlier on in Acts 2 is the infamous account of the "**sound from heaven coming to earth like a violent wind.**" There was a crowd of devout Jews gathered from nations, many who spoke different languages. Suddenly, they could all understand one another, able to speak in one another's language. That account is familiar to everyone.

Can you imagine the scene? Put yourself in the story. All this is going on and one of the disciples speaks about the forgiveness of sins and being "**saved from this corrupt generation.**" Would you have been one of those that was so awed by events of the day and Peter's offer, that you ran forward and said, "Baptize me!" And if you did, what might have been the reason?

As Peter reminds the crowd that God had made Jesus both Lord and Messiah, and suggests everyone had a part in his crucifixion, we are told that the people "**were cut to the heart.**" Perhaps they wanted to be baptized because they felt guilty. Perhaps they wanted to be baptized because they were fearful and wanted God's forgiveness. Those possibilities seem quite likely.

Today though, in Peachland, Summerland, Kelowna, Penticton and anywhere else, that kind of messaging is of little value. Folks today are not about to be shamed into conversion. They are not likely to be very enthused about a promise of "forgiveness" of transgressions. Those are not meaningful propositions. I would suggest that ministers and lay folks alike who believe in this approach are seriously misguided. I think they are

doing more harm than good when one looks at where God's love comes from, and what Jesus really preached. Certainly, that kind of speak will not encourage folks to come and visit us, let alone be a part of what we are doing.

We try our best to live the life Jesus sacrificed himself for. We pray and offer our time and talents in ministry here in Peachland and elsewhere. We are generous, kind and loving people and we live by example. However, we don't experience 3,000 new baptisms a year let alone any most Sundays. Our congregation is growing steadily but not at the exponential rate Peter spoke about.

“Peter said to them, repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.”

I like to consider the word “rethink” rather than repent. What does it mean to rethink the way we act and the way we behave? If we move past the personal, past the me and toward the we or them, what are the possibilities? When I consider not first and foremost what is good for me, but what might be good for you, good for the community, good for other nations, or good for the environment, where is God? Where does the ministry of Jesus lead?

This past Friday in a response to a request from Middleton Nova Scotia, we rang our church bell 23 times for each life lost in the horrific events that occurred there April 18 and 19th. We have no idea who was listening, but those that were gathered felt this prayerful act and know it was experienced elsewhere. We know as well that those who are grieving were lifted up, if ever so slightly, by the knowledge that churches across the country were ringing their bells at precisely the same time to support them.

In our church community we have rethought how we need to stay connected during the pandemic. We are doing that through phone, drop ins (vs. drop outs), video chats and online worship and coffee time. We are working on a new vision, much like Peter was with the disciples, we want to hold together during the crisis. And as we all know, hundreds and thousands of people are doing likewise throughout the world. Like that day of Pentecost when different languages could be understood, we have one language across nations, solidarity in Human Spirit. One could liken it to a kind of “Baptism.” It is a time when there is an incredible new understanding, we are all connected, we are all part of the human family and we are all in this together.

Up until the events of Covid 19, many of us, perhaps most of us, would look at the possibility of harmony across culture, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social status and economic standing as an impossibility.

We wonder how the world can reconcile itself. We wonder and are concerned that the planet can even survive let alone thrive again.

Some were following Jesus during his ministry, but there were rather few committed disciples. Although brutal and tragic, Jesus' death was actually a tremendous catalyst, a huge "**Spirit Spark**" which brought light and hope back into the world. Many were baptized, seekers of a new and just beginning. Many could see that truth and justice could replace anarchy and deceit. Belief in the resurrection filled people with optimism. That is one of the reasons we celebrate Easter, a time when we welcome optimism back into the world despite what surrounds us. The resurrection promise is a catalyst to visions of new love, forgiveness, reconciliation and new life.

This Easter as we have celebrated Christ's resurrection, we have been consumed in the darkness of a worldwide pandemic. I'm wondering though if it might be another catalyst, another Spirit Spark that has the potential to bring new living light onto our human family. Could this be something that invites hundreds of thousands of people into a new baptism, a commitment to proclaim resolutely that all are made in God's image? All are children of creation, all are equal. Can this be a catalyst to get the human family reunited?

I will be wondering about that in the next days, weeks and months and wondering what I might do to embody that vision. Perhaps you might too.

Thanks for listening this morning,
Amen