

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH | Readings & Sermon
June 14, 2020 – Second Sunday After Pentecost

FIRST LESSON: Romans 5:1-8 (NRSV)

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person -- though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

SECOND LESSON: Matthew 9:23-10:8 (NRSV)

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’

“Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food.

“Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

“Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles.

“When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.

REFLECTION: “Pulling the Spirit Out of the Hat”

All of us know people who always seem to know what to do. If there are young people in the room, they know just what weird fad the kids are interested in, the dating status of their current teen heartthrob, and how to play the incredibly complicated video game that they have loaded on their iPads. If we see them at a funeral, we notice that the words they say to those who are mourning are heartfelt, genuine and comforting. If we are invited to their homes for dinner, we feel at ease; the evening advances graciously and there are no awkward pauses. A honky-tonk bar full of drunken oil workers in Red Deer? No problem. A cocktail reception at Rideau Hall with the Governor General? Ditto. A pandemic? Social isolation? A change of job or a move across country or even to a different country? Grief? Loss? Celebrations? Complex human situations and encounters? Whatever the situation, these people have the ability to land on their feet, assess the situation, and react appropriately. They shake the dust from their shoes, pick themselves up and start all over again.

Or at least they seem to. And yet, it may well be that their actions – so unruffled, so fine and considered, so absolutely perfect in every way – are, in fact, the result of pain and suffering. It may be that the situation that they react to so perfectly, terrifies them as much as it terrifies us. But there is something about these people that equips them to neither flee, freeze or fury – which many in their position might do – in the face of life’s challenges. No matter the situation they find themselves in, they seem to endure. No matter the situation, they seem to be able to reach inside themselves at times when the average person might find themselves at the end of their energy and spiritual resources and pull a rabbit out of the emptiness.

Even when they wonder if they are empty, they have the experience, nonetheless, of discovering that their cup overflows, and that there is still more life-giving water.

There are many theories of personality. There are many ideas of what it means to be human. Christianity, just as it has the doctrine of the Trinity as a framework to understanding God, also has a doctrine about us – about what our personhood is like, about how we are made, and about how we are constantly being made. The technical term for this is called ‘Christian anthropology.’

I have been thinking a lot about who we are during this crisis. As many of you know, once or twice a month, all the ministers of Horseshoe Falls regional council meet together and talk about how they are coping in this time. During the darkest days of the pandemic, a minister I knew confessed during a Zoom breakout session at one of these meetings, “I can’t do this. I was not trained to do this. I was trained to reach out and connect with people, and I can no longer do this. I have reached my limit. I know nothing about computers and Zooming and I don’t want to learn. So I have asked my M&P for my vacation and study leave. Maybe when the seven weeks are up, the pandemic will be over.”

That minister’s words cast a pall over the group. He was saying just what some of us were feeling, but hearing his words was chilling. They leeched the hope out of the room quickly, and allowed despair to quickly drift in.

But then, at just the right moment, another minister in our discussion group graciously challenged our overwhelming mood of lament with just the right words. She asked us, “What about the Holy Spirit? What is stopping us from moving into this crisis trusting that the Holy Spirit will provide us with the very gifts that we need to reach out and connect with our congregations?”

And then, this wise minister gently quoted a bit of Matthew from today's reading. "*Do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.*"

There was a pause in our Zoom breakout. We all breathed a little bit more deeply. Something had entered into our anxious and bitter suffering. It felt like peace. But, as I think about it, I realize that it was also hope.

Christian anthropology assures us that we are created in God's image. That means that while we have certain skills and attributes that predominate and which account for our individual characters, there is a whole lot in us that we do not even suspect is there. The things that Shakespeare's Hamlet reminds us of, when he points out that we are such stuff as dreams are made on.

*What a piece of work is man,
How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty,
In form and moving how express and admirable,
In action how like an Angel,
In apprehension how like a god,
The beauty of the world,
The paragon of animals.*

In other words, within us there is not just a finite character, with clear limits. Within us, at the edge of what we are comfortable with, there is also something infinite, something inexhaustible, creative and generative, something wise, something very like God.

I think it is people who know themselves and trust themselves to be more than they appear, who are able to pull the rabbit out of the hat. And yet, something often gets in the way of this happening. Fear. Anxiety. Shame. Like the minister on the Zoom chat, sometimes life interferes with our ability to reach in and plumb our depths. And then, even though the harvest should be plentiful, the labourers become few.

This is when the Holy Spirit steps in. We are being. We are who we have been made to be – what we know about ourselves. And we are also becoming. What the Spirit is constantly helping us understand about ourselves, and helping us to pull out of the seeming emptiness inside us and reveal to the world.

This is precisely what Paul is telling us in Romans, when he writes: "*that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*"

"I can't. I won't. It's not safe. It's not me. It's not what I am comfortable with." These are all things we say to ourselves when we are faced with the unknown. These are words that the first disciples could certainly have said when Jesus sent them out, commanding them to go out and proclaim the Good News, that, "The kingdom of heaven has come near."

"Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons," Jesus said. "You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food."

Can you see that Jesus is asking his disciples to go out with nothing but who they are? With nothing but their character to rely on? Without money, provisions, a change of clothes, a staff or sandals? Can you see that Jesus is asking his disciples to go out with nothing but their humanity?

And yet, Jesus expects his disciples to walk into the unknown with nothing but who they are and pull miracles out of the hat. Jesus expects his disciples to confront themselves. And to be surprised at what they find when they do. To discover that they are such stuff as dreams are made on.

We are more than we suspect. We are better than people tell us we are. We are filled with power and grace and love. The gifts of the spirit are always available to us.

We may feel that we have reached our limits. But as followers of Christ we never do. We are a people who always seem to know what to do. We are a people who have the ability to land on our feet, assess the situation, and react appropriately. We are miracle workers. We are Christ's eyes and arms and hands and feet and heart.

Like Christ, when he seemed to have reached his limits, we can be the miracle that cures the sick, raises the dead, cleanses the lepers, casts out demons, dismantles a system that promotes racism, and that makes a virus powerless.