

September 10, 2023

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 18 / Creation 1

Meditation: "Is Anybody There?"

This past week the Congregational Support Commission of ARWRC held their monthly meeting. The commission carries primary responsibility for the relationship between communities of faith and the region, and their partnership on matters requiring a decision by both parties, other than the pastoral relationship. The responsibilities of the commission include *the articulation of ministry and mission; *the use of financial and property resources; *local governance; and *the overall health and well-being of communities of faith such as changes in the life cycle, dealing with real property, etc.

One of the things that we do is to review the annual reports of C'soF. The reports give us an idea of the overall health of a CoF, and help us spot trends that are common, which helps in formulating educational offerings that support C'soF. For example, we might discover that there is a widespread need for training Trustees on their responsibilities as we pore through the annual reports.

The one thing we have noticed is the sheer number of C'soF that are struggling both financially and/or with having enough people to govern, fundraise, and engage in mission and outreach. Another thing we have noticed is that many C'soF also report major changes in their rural communities with the construction of large subdivisions. However, growing communities doesn't seem to translate into growing congregations or growing finances.

As we talked about how to support C'soF, we talked about the new reality of our population. Many who move into these subdivisions are from non-Christian nations. They are Hindu, or Muslim, or Buddhist, or Sikh. Others are fundamentalist Christians. Many are secularists. Of all the people who do not identify with a specific faith tradition, many describe themselves as SBNR – Spiritual, But Not Religious. SBNRs believe in some power greater than ourselves, but do not see the value of, or perhaps they just don't trust religious institutions. What they desire is a personal and individual connection with the greater power. They want to know that there is someone or something there.

I know, you think I'm rambling on about stuff you already know and think none of it is relevant to the scripture lesson. I'm getting there.

I think that the SBNRs would be delighted to hear the words of Jesus, when he says "I am there." It is an affirmation that there is power greater than us, there is someone there. What they might miss is the part that says, "Where two or three are gathered," and "I am there *among them*." I don't want to suggest that it is not possible to have a spiritual experience of God on your own, such as watching the sunset over Lake Huron, or something like that. What I do think is that the fullest expression of an experience of God is found in relationship with others. After all, as a Trinity, God knows relationships.

The first part of the lesson talks about the importance of working at maintaining good relationships within the community – "if your brother or sister sins against you," this is what you need to do, these are the steps to follow, this is how to restore the relationship. This second part talks about a relationship that includes Jesus, but it is not a personal, one-on-one relationship. It is a relationship of multiples.

There's a funny thing about relationships. Any relationship I've ever been in, romantic or otherwise, always started with neither of us knowing the other, AND one of us taking the initiative to start a relationship. Say a new neighbour moves in and you knock on the door to welcome them, perhaps with a plate of freshly baked cookies, and they look suspiciously at you and ask, "What do you want?", and you reply, "I'd like to be friends."

Many congregations live by the motto, 'If you build it, they will come.' They assume that if they provide something, like a praise band, or a Sunday School, that many in the new subdivision will just start coming. My question is, how would they know about the praise band or the Sunday School, unless you tell them? It is no longer enough to be friendly or even welcoming towards those who come. If you want to build relationships, you have to reach out and invite.

Next Sunday, being the third Sunday of September, is 'Back to Church Sunday.' It is a day when, like children returning to school, we move on from our summer routines and get back to our schedules. It is also the Sunday when we reach out to neighbours, old and new, and invite them into a new relationship, with us and with God. It is the Sunday when we invite them to join us at church. And just so there is no misunderstanding, I am not suggesting you invite others to join us to save or perpetuate the institution of the church, but to create new and life-affirming relationships.

I know I won't be here next Sunday. I'll be with my daughter and new son-in-law and his family, but God will be here, and so will Len, who has prepared to lead you in worship. Whether you come alone, or bring a neighbour or two, know this, that where you gather in God's name, God will be there. Thanks be to God.