

August 25, 2024

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 16

Meditation: “Homecoming”

I can't believe that summer is almost over. I grew up north of Toronto in what was the small town of Newmarket (there were only about 12,000 people living there when we moved there in 1965). When we heard the radio ads for the CNE, we knew we only had two weeks of summer left until school started – Labour Day weekend was the closing weekend of the fair. And now, next weekend is Labour Day weekend.

With the end of summer, there is the anticipated influx of students to London for Fanshawe and Western, in fact, some have already started arriving. Of course, that also means that Homecoming weekend is right around the corner. I've already seen and heard about some of what is planned for homecoming. It is planned for the last weekend of September, the 27th to 29th, only a month away. This year will be the 75th Homecoming weekend. There will be various breakfasts, brunches, lunches and dinners. There will be awards ceremonies. But the highlight has always been the Homecoming football game. The Mustangs will be hosting Queen's Golden Gaels at 1 p.m. on Saturday for a matchup between these two longtime rivals. I remember the rivalry between these two teams from my own days at Western more than a handful of years ago. There will be plenty of celebrating and partying happening in London that weekend.

Speaking of celebrating and partying, there was lots of that happening in Jerusalem as Solomon brought the Ark of the Covenant from the Tent of Meeting, where his father David had placed it when he moved it to Jerusalem, into the newly completed temple that Solomon had constructed as God's home on earth. The Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Holy of Holies at the very inner core of the new temple. David had presumed to build a temple, but God stopped him from doing so. His son Solomon was the one to build the temple. And that Holy of Holies, that innermost room in the temple, it was separated from the rest of the temple by a curtain veil.... the one that was torn from top to bottom when Jesus died. The Ark of the Covenant is described throughout the Bible variously as either the footstool of the LORD, or the throne of the LORD. And the Holy of Holies was entered only once a year, and then only by the

High Priest, and he had a rope tied around his ankle so that he could be pulled to safety should anything go amiss.

This is all a really long way to say that that day was, in a way, God's homecoming. It was the day that God moved into God's new home, from the Tent of Meeting. It was the day that God took up permanent residence in the city of Jerusalem. For the Jewish people, as long as the temple stood, God was at home in their midst. That is why they were so downcast when the Babylonians toppled Solomon's temple, and why it was so important to them to rebuild the temple at the end of the Babylonian exile.

I wonder, do we feel the same way about our church buildings? Do we see them as God's home in our midst? When a church closes and is either demolished or converted into use as something other than a place of worship, do we see it as a sign that God has abandoned us; left us to our own devices? And then what?

When the Romans toppled the second temple in the year 75 C.E., I imagine the question that the Jewish people were asking was, "and now what?" The temple was not only God's earthly residence, but it was the center of ritual practice. The temple was where birds and animals were slaughtered and consumed in flame as an offering to God. At one level, the offering was made to compensate for the sins of the one making the offering; to put aright the relationship between God and the sinner. At another level, it was about sharing a meal with God. If you want to maintain good relations with your neighbour, you invite the neighbour to dinner. The burnt offering was a way of inviting God to dine with you; to maintain a good relationship. When the temple fell for a second time, none of that could happen. The Jewish people had to figure out another way of maintaining their relationship with God without being able to offer up burnt offerings.

As you all probably know, Judaism has not gone extinct since the Romans toppled the temple. Judaism has transformed. Instead of the ritual practice of burnt offerings, we now have Rabbinic Judaism. Judaism was transformed from a physical ritual into a more cerebral form of worship. Judaism was transformed from a cultic practice into a religion of the written and spoken word.

The question for us is, can Christianity also transform itself? What might Christianity look like without our aging sanctuaries? Where would we come together to worship God, or would we come together to worship God? What would worship look like? Or will there be a revival, such as happened after two world wars, that will allow us to save our buildings? I wondered if the pandemic might have that effect, but apparently not. Even then, what will worship look like?

In another month, Western will celebrate Homecoming. Yet this is not the first homecoming. Former graduates have been returning to Western every year for 74 years. This 75th Homecoming is not the first, nor will it be the last. And win or lose, it will not be the final showdown between the Golden Gaels and the Mustangs. They will face each other on the gridiron many more times to come.

In the reading for today, God came home to his new temple, for the first time. Yet God was already with the people. God was in their hearts and in their minds long before Solomon built that temple. And so it is with us. God does not reside only in this building, beautiful as it may be. God resides in our hearts and in our minds, in good times and in challenging times, world without end. Yet it is here that God meets us at the table, to share a meal with us. Thanks be to God.