

2020 06 28 – Welcome in the time of COVID-19

Matthew 10:40-42

Today our service is focussed on welcome and in particular, welcoming the stranger in this time of COVID-19. During our Community Learning Time, we've already had an opportunity to break into groups and discuss this topic. So now, before we delve deeper into the scripture reading and the meaning of welcome, I want to spend some time reflecting on where we have been over the past few months.

Our world changed dramatically on March 18th, when our premier declared a state of emergency in our province. In that moment, life as we knew it ended and terms like self-isolation, social distancing and active cases became part of our daily conversation. On March 17th, our Council Executive had already held a special meeting where they decided to stop all in-person worship services in our building.

I know that the staff and volunteers at First United Church have worked hard to keep our congregation connected during this time of physical distancing. Along with our online worship services, we have also sent out regular communications via email and Canada Post. Membership classes, bible study and other groups continued to meet online via Zoom. And, very quickly, our Visiting Working Group started phoning every person in the congregation who was not on our email list. With their help we were able to increase the number of people

receiving emails and also create a small list of members who now receive the Sunday liturgy and sermon via Canada Post.

At their May meeting, the Council carefully and faithfully weighed the information that they had at that time, and decided that we would continue to worship online and our church building would remain closed throughout the summer. Summer is always a quieter time for our congregation and this delay will give us an opportunity to assess the impact of the province's re-opening plan and to create our own detailed plan and procedures for re-opening the church. An ad-hoc committee has been formed to do this work and their first meeting is this Tuesday evening.

Now, as things are opening up, we are also taking advantage of opportunities to connect in new ways outside of our building: the Membership and Pastoral Care Committee had lunch together in Elmwood Park last week, the Fundraising Committee has planned our first-ever online auction and on Friday afternoon I led a worship service for thirty people at Riverview Village Estates. When meeting in person, we are following social distancing protocols, wearing masks when appropriate and carefully sanitizing when we are done.

I believe that we have done a great job of keeping this congregation both safe and connected during these past few months. But now it is time to look beyond the people on our email and mailing lists. It is time to look beyond our existing congregation and ask ourselves: What about those who are on the outside?

What about the strangers who come knocking at our door? How do they find out who we are? How do we welcome them?

In today's scripture passage Jesus is sending his disciples out to the surrounding villages to heal and to preach. He is encouraging them to ask for help and to accept with gratitude the hospitality and the welcome they will receive. And he is assuring them that their hosts will be suitably rewarded.

Think about how hard it would be to go into a foreign place and to accept hospitality from people that you've haven't met before – especially when you know you will never be able to reciprocate in kind. Can you imagine the questions that the disciples were asking their teacher, their rabbi, "Why would these villagers want to feed us and give us a place to sleep? How can we repay them?" And Jesus responding, "Those who welcome prophets will receive the reward reserved for the prophets themselves; those who welcome holy people just because they are holy will receive the reward of the holy ones."

And what is that reward? Jesus also said, "Those who welcome you, also welcome me, and those who welcome me, welcome the One who sent me." I believe the reward is a deeper connection with God, a sense of purpose and meaning, a new understanding of the words, "it is better to give than to receive." The reward for welcome and for hospitality is relationship with the holy. It is love, both given and received.

You never know who is going to come knocking at your door, who is going to come looking for a place in this congregation. They could be a new professional in town: a teacher, a doctor, a nurse. Or they could be a transient searching for food, shelter or safety. No matter who they are or where they come from, they come as prophet, as healer, as teacher, as holy ones. No matter who they are or where they come from, they offer us the opportunity, to learn, to be healed, and to be inspired. They offer us the opportunity to be welcoming, to be hospitable.

So as we look forward to a least two more months as a church without a building. As we look forward to at least another year of living in the midst of a pandemic. I believe these are some of the questions that we need to ask ourselves:

- Where is our doorstep? How and where might these prophets, these healers, these holy ones be trying to connect with us?
- While our building is closed (and even when it re-opens) what are we welcoming them into? How do we describe who we are and what we have to offer?
- How will they know that they are welcome? What can we be doing to make sure that they are comfortable enough to come in and to stay?

During this service, the conversation has already begun. These are the questions that I will be thinking about during these summer months. These are the questions that I will be bringing to each committee when we meet again at the end of August or beginning of September. So I invite you to continue to consider

these questions and feel free to call and email if you have any further comments or suggestions that you would like to offer.

Just as Jesus sent his disciples into the world, so Christ is sending people to us. They come in many shapes and sizes, they come seeking and searching, and they come as healers, preachers, prophets – as sharers of the Good News of God's love. Will we be ready when they arrive?