

2022 04 10 – A Liminal Time

Luke 19:28-40

Luke 22:1-38 (The Inclusive Bible)

Yesterday morning as I sat down to write this sermon, I looked outside and saw that it was snowing. Just an hour earlier the sun had been shining and I'd been thinking about going for a hike in the river hills; but now the ground was turning white. Spring officially arrived a few weeks ago, winter is over, and yet snow was falling. We are living in this bizarre season where winter is gone, but it's not yet fully spring. This is called a liminal time, a time when we are living at a threshold between an ending and a new beginning.

In today's scripture passages Jesus' disciples were also living in a liminal time. Jesus had been telling them for weeks, that he was going to die. They all knew that the Jewish and Roman authorities were not happy with Jesus' ministry. The authorities were concerned about the large crowds that gathered when Jesus spoke. They were concerned that he was preaching about a new kingdom, a new reign of God. They were concerned that Jesus would somehow impact their own hold on power. Jesus, like so many other prophets, was aware of the dangers lurking in places of power, like Jerusalem, and yet it was to Jerusalem that he was travelling.

His disciples were aware that Jesus was in danger and would probably die, but they also saw the crowds that he attracted and the gift of healing that he shared. They believed in Jesus' message of justice and peace. And so they followed his instructions and organized a parade for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. In the midst

of the fear and the worry and even the anticipatory grief, the disciples celebrated Jesus' revolutionary ministry, his ministry of justice for the poor and the marginalized.

And then, on the day of Passover, Jesus sent two disciples to prepare a special meal, the Jewish seder. At the appropriate time, Jesus took a place at the table with his disciples and he said, "I've longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." Jesus shared the bread and the cup and asked them to remember him. The disciples were aware in that moment that Jesus ministry, as they knew it, was about to end. They knew that Jesus was going to die, but they had no idea how his death would happen or what their role would be in the continuation of his ministry. This was a liminal time, a time when a key part of their lives was ending and they had no idea what would happen next.

The institutional church is also living in a liminal time. A prophet of the 21st century, the late Phyllis Tickle, wrote, "every five hundred years the Church feels compelled to hold a giant rummage sale." Using the words of the Right Reverend Mark Dyer she continued, "about every five hundred years the empowered structures of institutionalized Christianity, whatever they may be at that time, become an intolerable carapace [or shell] that must be shattered in order that renewal and new growth may occur." We just happening to be living in the midst of the latest rummage sale, the shattering of the church as we know it. Jesus' disciples were there at the beginning, when the first death and rebirth was taking place. We're joining in 2000 years later and that same cycle of death and rebirth is happening to us. (*The Great Emergence* (p. 16). Baker Books, 2008)

As part of my work for the larger church, I chair the Property Commission for the Living Skies Regional Council. In that role, I am part of a small group of people who oversee the buying and selling of United Church property and the closing of congregations in our province. In the last two years, since our new regional council was formed, a total of nineteen churches have disbanded and another nine are currently in the process of disbanding. I can tell you that the rummage sale is real. The United Church of Canada, as we know it, is dying. In fact, the numbers tell us that this has been happening since the 1960's, and the process is now accelerating.

Like Jesus' disciples, we have to face the reality of death. But at the same time, as Christians, we are aware that death is not the end. We know that new life comes from death. I want to show you a simple graph that illustrates this point beautifully. The graph has an upside-down "U" or a hill on the left that illustrates the creation, building, peak, and then the gradual demise of an institution, in our case the church. And overlapping that hill is another "U" this time right side up. This valley-shaped structure illustrates the process of new life coming out of death. It includes steps such as storytelling, experimentation, partnerships, structural alignment and eventually financial stability.

Our reality is that we are now living at the bottom of this valley. As The United Church of Canada, Living Skies Regional Council and as First United Church in Swift Current, we are living at the bottom of the "U." We are living in an in-between time, a liminal time. We are living at a threshold between an ending and a new beginning.

Of course, we can live in multiple liminal spaces at the same time. We are also in a liminal season with the COVID-19 pandemic. We know it's ending sometime, hopefully soon. But we have no idea what life will look like post-pandemic. What have we learned? What will change? Can we really go back to our pre-pandemic way of being and interacting?

Liminal times are hard. In the words of Susan Beaumont, They are “challenging, disorienting, and unsettling. We strive to move forward with purpose and certainty. Instead, we feel as though we are trudging through mud, moving away from something comfortable and known, toward something that can't yet be known.” It is hard to let go. Our fear of death, any kind of death, is very real and so like Judas and Peter we often make mistakes. Because of the fear of change, we can even betray ourselves and those we care about. Like the disciples, we struggle to know what to take with us on the journey: what to let go of, what to keep and what to acquire. Liminal times are hard. (*How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going* (p. 2). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Kindle Edition.)

When I left the house yesterday morning, I was wearing a summer jacket, no gloves and regular shoes. I had no idea that I would be stepping in slushy puddles, while wiping snow off my car before I could make it home. The reality is that in liminal times we make wrong assumptions, we try new things and they sometimes fail. We make mistakes and then we learn from them. Liminal times are challenging

That's why faith, hope and love are so important. Jesus gave all of those wonderful gifts to his disciples and to us. During their last supper, Jesus asked his followers to remember him when ever they shared the cup and the bread. He knew that they would be encouraged and comforted in that memory. He knew that they had a rough road ahead of them and so Jesus offered his own faith, hope and love in the form of food and drink.

As we move through the days of Holy Week, as we live in these liminal times, I want you to remember the promise that is coming, the promise of Easter, the promise of spring, the promise of new life. In the words of Susan Beaumont, It is important to know that "liminal seasons are also exciting and innovative. The promise of a new beginning unleashes creative energy, potential, and passion. All truly great innovations are incubated in liminality. God's greatest work occurs in liminal space." (*How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going* (p. 2). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Kindle Edition.)

We will explore more about the possibilities of liminality next Sunday. For now let us remember the life and ministry of Jesus as we prepare to share the bread and the cup.