



Sermons from Northwood United Church

"What is my song again?"

James 5:13-18, Mark 9:38-41

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May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There was a conversation that took place between a group of Roman Catholics and a group of Quakers. It was wonderfully friendly as they spoke of the ways in which each group was working with the poor and they were having a great time comparing notes on their respective work in prisons and overseas. They had so much in common until somehow the conversation drifted on to the differing ways they are organized. As you may know, Quakers form into meetings and within traditional Quaker meetings there are no clergy, no hierarchy at all. The Quaker tradition prides itself as an egalitarian society which emerged as a holiness in reaction to 17th century Anglican and Catholic hierarchy of the time. There is deep and fundamental resistance to priesthood as an intermediary between the unwashed masses and God.

Well the discussion began to get heated until in frustration one priest said, "well, you have abolished the centuries old, tried and true tradition of the priesthood." To which a soft spoken seasoned Quaker replied, raising himself up in his chair, "no friend, not at all. We have not abolished the priesthood. We have abolished the laity."

To abolish the priesthood would be to say that no human being can be an intermediary between God and us. We don't need intermediaries. To abolish the laity is to say that every single one of us at any moment may just be that vehicle, the conduit that God uses to connect with humanity and to make God's transforming difference in the world. The priesthood of us all.

The disciples come to Jesus and say, "We caught somebody healing on your behalf who is not part of our circle here, and we told him to stop." And Jesus responds, please. We need all the help we can get. If someone is healing in my name, they won't soon be against me. And in a beautiful inversion of the George Bushism he said, "Anyone who is not against us is for us. Anyone who serves, heals, liberates, lifts a burden, quenches a thirst, whether they know it or not, is doing God's work, and is in a small way, a conduit of God's grace- a priest of divine love.

James writes to the church, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let that one call a circle of friends and spiritual elders and let them pray, anointing with oil in the name of the Lord... the prayer of the faithful will save the sick... if any have sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sin to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed." James has painted this picture of an intense community of people who get quite involved in the nitty gritty of each other's joys and struggles and do the holy work of forgiveness and healing, celebration and making holy. This is a community of priests for each other- a community that shows up on the lonely night, fills the front lawn with flamingos on the first night of retirement, picks each other's kids up from school, drives you downtown for chemo. This is a circle of holy friends daring enough to ask about your son's drinking problem, courageous enough to try to love you through your marriage breakup, and in the muddy middle of it all, remind you who they believe you really are deep down.

I have experienced the way the church can show itself as this kind of community, and I sense God calling us to ever more deeply and daringly bear the blessing and grace of God to each other and to the wider community. I believe we are called to be the kind of community in which, when our friends ask us why we go to church we simply say, come, taste and see, and the story

of this church is a parable of the kingdom of God, a story of the way things work when the radical love of God is placed at the centre.

Now it was one thing for the writer of James, at the end of the first century to call for community such as this. It is another thing altogether, in the age of facebook, instant messaging, video surveillance and the media's ability to take any small bit of communication and parade it before the world, often out of context. In James' time, what you did and said was never recorded, and the only way for the vast majority of people to pass on information was directly. Given the literacy rates at the time, even his letter required having someone there who could read it. It was a time in which spoken word, not tweets or facebook messages, or email, but face to face communication ruled. Humans were humans and there was gossip and unhealthy community back then, but it went way slower and it was done face to face.

Today is different. Now, the tools we have today are powerfully good when used well. The Arab Spring happened to some degree because protesters could communicate immediately on Twitter. And we can know about it, and see it immediately on facebook. Today community can be formed much more broadly and much more quickly. However, it can be destroyed, privacy can be invaded much more broadly and much more quickly too. Our challenge is to use these tools in the creation of sacred community- community in which the very souls of the people involved are held and respected, community where sacred friendship is the norm, the standard, in which all tools of communication are used in the aid of sacred friendship.

Which means we need to know each other. We need to put in the time, eat at one another's tables, listen and pay attention. If we are to be a community of souls, that is not going to happen on Twitter, but at table. It is going to happen the way the legendary African tribe made it happen. In this legendary tribe, when a woman finds she is pregnant, she goes out into the wilderness with a few close friends and together they pray and meditate until they hear the song of the child. They recognize that every soul has its own vibration that expresses its unique flavour and purpose. When the women, attune to the song, they sing it out loud. Then, they return and teach it to everyone else.

When the child is born, the community gathers and sings the child's song to him or her. After, when the child enters education, the village gathers again and chants the child's song, and again when the child passes through initiation into adulthood. At the time of marriage, once again the person hears his or her song.

And finally at the end of life, when the soul is about to pass from this world to the next, the family and friends gather at the person's bed, just as they did at birth, and they sing the person in to the next life.

There is one other occasion upon which the villagers sing to the person,. If at any time during his or her life, the person commits a crime, the individual is called into the centre of the community and the people gather round. They don't judge or reprimand. It is not an angry circle, but a circle of memory and faith. They sing their song to them. This community recognizes that the correction for antisocial behaviour is not punishment; it is love that remembers identity, soul. When you recognize your song, you have no desire or need to do anything that would hurt or destroy.

A friend is someone who knows your song, and sings it to you when you have forgotten it. Those who love you are not fooled by mistakes you have made or dark images you hold about yourself. They remember your beauty when you feel ugly, your wholeness when you are broken, our innocence when you feel guilty, and your purpose when you are floundering.

Our community here, the Christian community is called to learn one another's song, to know it and hold it with deep respect. And then to sing it just when it is time. This is slow community, deep community, sacred community. In a world awash with pseudo friendship, we are called to be a circle of sacred friendship- priests of divine love of the first order. Amen.