

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

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The Impossible Has Already Happened

Acts 2:42-47 – *A description of how the resurrection was lived out in the community life of the earliest Christian church.*

One of my favorite authors is a farmer from Kentucky named Wendell Berry. Berry is one of the most celebrated writers of our times, whose consistent theme is healthy community.

In one short story,¹ Berry tells of Mary, a young bride from a wealthy family who during the depression, falls in love and marries Elton Penn, a much poorer man whose ambition is to be a farmer. But Mary's family disapproves of her choice of husband and disowns her, and so the young bride and her groom start their lives in a two room house on a small plot of land. It is not much, but they are happy together. And they have great neighbours. They are readily adopted into a small community of six families, all within half a mile, who are good neighbours in the way that people are when they all depend on each other to be good neighbours. They believed in the old adage that "many hands make light work," and so they often worked together. "Some work only the men did together... Some work only the women did together... Some work the men and women did together..."² They are none of them rich, "except in the things that they continued to be rich in though they were poor"³ and it is those things that matter most. They work together, they worship together, they laugh together. This small, tight-knit community takes in the young couple and become mentors and friends to them. Two years go by and they settle into the work, the life and the community. And they are happy.

One morning Mary wakes up feeling ill but gets up and helps her husband get out the door so he can help a neighbour plough a field. She tries not to show her sickness, because she knows that he is watching her carefully. She had been tired and irritable the night before, which was unusual for her, and Elton noticed. He is watching her carefully, his worry showing. She avoids meeting his eye and busies herself about the small kitchen. She hides her illness and thinks she has masked it well.

When he leaves, she struggles through her chores. She puts on her coat and boots and visits the outhouse. She feeds the chickens and gives them fresh water. The cold March wind chills her to the bone. By the time she gets back to the house she is shivering. She aches and is overwhelmingly tired. She slumps into a chair, but a fever is causing her chills, and she cannot stay warm. The fire burns down in the stove, and the house is growing cold, but she has no energy to feed the fire. Worst of all, her misery makes her sorry for herself. She is sick and she is

¹ Wendell Berry, "A Jonquil for Mary Penn," in *Fidelity: Five Stories* (Pantheon, 1992), 61-81.

² "A Jonquil for Mary Penn," 68.

³ This quote is actually from the title story of that same collection: "Fidelity," in *Fidelity*, 118-9.

alone. Eventually she returns to her bed and lies there, chattering and shivering, brooding over her sorry lot in life, until she falls asleep.

How long she sleeps, she does not know, but when she wakes, the house is warm, the tea kettle is muttering and steaming on the stove, and Josie, one of her neighbours, is sitting in the rocking chair by the window, busy with her needlework, humming the tune of an old hymn, keeping watch. Watching her, Mary realizes that she had not fooled Elton that morning, that he must have stopped by Josie's house on the way to the field and let her know that Mary was sick. Feeling herself watched, Josie raises her head and smiles, "Well, are you awake? Are you alright?"

And Mary, thinking not at all about her illness, felt her heart fill with gratitude for a husband who had paid attention to her need, gratitude for neighbours who would not let her suffer alone, gratitude for this one particular neighbour who dropped everything to come over and watch by her bedside, gratitude for the realization that she is indeed rich in friends even if poor in goods – and so Mary replies with absolute conviction, "Oh, I'm wonderful!" Then, secure as a child in her mother's arms, she falls back asleep, as the neighbour rocks and stitches and keeps watch.

Wendell Berry's story is one about abundant life, about a community of those who have glad and generous hearts (to use the phrase from today's reading from the book of Acts), a community of those who are richer than many who have many more possessions and opportunities. It is a story of people who know they belong to one another and who know that they depend on one another.

That is our story too, as we have been rediscovering over the past few weeks. I have been really proud of how this congregation has responded to physical distancing. Even though pretty much every aspect of our community life has been disrupted – no Sunday services, no coffee afterwards, no choir, no meetings, no Ham supper, no UCW gatherings – even though every aspect of our community life has been disrupted, we have rapidly adapted to an entirely new way of being community. We have learned how to support each other when we can't be together physically. Our phone tree is busily calling many of those in our congregation every week. A buddy system is offering additional support. Glynis and her team are sending out Sunnybrook Gifts two or three times a week. Through this livestreamed service, virtual coffee gatherings, window visits, honking car horns, virtual happy hours, and much else besides, we have put our imaginations to work and harnessed some new technologies to the work of being church. And in the process we have learned that our ties to each other are deep and strong and rich. At the beginning of March, I wouldn't have thought it possible. But now the impossible has happened.

That is the message of the Easter community described in the book of Acts: we belong to one another; we are bound by ties deeper than our calculations of our desires and needs; we are a family beyond blood, a community defined by more than geography. We need each other. We depend on each other. And we are the hands and feet and heart of Christ for each other.

Rebecca Solnit, who studies disasters, says "The first lesson a disaster teaches is that everything is connected. In fact, disasters ... are crash courses in those connections."⁴

⁴Rebecca Solnit, "The Impossible Has Already Happened," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/07/what-coronavirus-can-teach-us-about-hope-rebecca-solnit>

The second lesson of disasters is that they change the way we think, and they help us see new possibilities. The people of Fort McMurray are living through a disaster inside a disaster these days. The spring thaw happened so fast, that the ice on the Athabasca River created an ice jam, and the melting water overflowed its banks and inundated the town. Floods are real and traumatic events, whenever and wherever they happen, but the ice breaking up is also a powerful metaphor of what happens in any disaster. Until the disaster, the way things are starts to look inevitable, frozen, as if there are no other possibilities. But then, all of a sudden, things start to move.

In Canada, people have been talking about a guaranteed annual income for decades. It has been studied, pilot programs have shown it could work, a federal white paper recommended it, but nothing ever happened. And then the pandemic shuts the economy down, and all of a sudden we have something that looks a fair bit like a guaranteed income program. It has got people talking. Maybe when the disaster is over, things don't have to go back to normal, just like after a flood, the river doesn't always go back to its old banks and bed. New channels can be carved.

In the U.S. for decades, universal health care has seemed like a socialist pipe dream, even though every other industrialized nation has it. In the last couple of months Joe Biden wrapped up the Democratic presidential nomination because the other opponents seemed too radical. "People are too attached to the health care plans they get with their employers," people said. "Universal health care is impossible," people said. And then the pandemic hit, and millions of people lost their jobs and their health care plans. The government, even the Republicans, scrambled to make sure that unemployed people were covered. The impossible has already happened. Maybe we don't have to go back to the way things were.

Perhaps this will be the moment that we recognize that there is enough food, clothing, shelter, healthcare and education for all – and that access to these things should not depend on what job you do and whether you earn enough money. [Solnit]

Perhaps this is the moment that we might reconsider the old dream of a community in which people look after each other with "glad and generous hearts," in which people can be rich in the things they can still be rich in even when they are poor.

Earlier this week, we sent out a Sunnybrook Gift with a photograph of these butterflies that we dug out of a closet after several years of dormancy. Glynis suggested that we might think of this period of physical distancing as one of "cocooning" and transformation. A caterpillar in a cocoon dissolves into a sort of living soup, made up of "imaginal cells" which is no longer a caterpillar and not yet something new. Perhaps this moment in time, this time of "cocooning" is a time for us to dissolve into something that is neither old nor new, but has the potential for something new and bold and better. Perhaps this is a time to imagine and work towards new possibilities, things that always seemed impossible, because you know, the impossible has already happened.

Before this pandemic struck, everything was not fine. There were lots of problems and we were stuck, frozen. I don't want things to go back to that.

A couple of nights ago, it was such a fine day I wanted to be outside, so I took my computer out onto the deck, and played a couple of games of solitaire as night fell. It wasn't long before I lost interest in the computer. I could hear the exuberance of spring in the air: birds of many species

wooing each other; frogs desperate for a mate, ducks quacking and geese honking and migrating birds who are here for such a short time that I don't recognize them by sight or sound, and loons making that plaintive call that only loons make and I don't know if anyone has ever come up with a name for it. I listened to the sounds of spring, and I felt connected to life in a way I have rarely felt before. It was absolutely beautiful and profoundly moving, and I am thinking, how many nights have I sat in my living room watching TV when this incredible drama has been going on just outside my window. I don't want things to go back to the way things were. I don't want to just go back to killing time in front of my TV. I want to sit out here every night.

In the same way, I don't want our society to go back to when so many were desperate to scrape together enough to pay the rent and feed their families. I don't want our economy to climb back on the fast train to environmental and climate catastrophe. I don't want to go back to being a caterpillar. I want wings! I want this – choose your metaphor: this spring flood, this storm, this cocooning time – to help us to find our way to a deeper and richer and more rewarding kind of community, in which we eat our food and care for one another with glad and generous hearts, in which we find the sort of wealth that we can still possess even when we are poor. It will take effort and we will have to fight for it. It may seem impossible, but remember, “the impossible has already happened!”