

October 4, 2020
“In Communion”

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Matthew 21:33-46

This past Tuesday I joined the CRUC Mid-Week Prayer group facilitated by Elaine Julian, and we valiantly tried to make sense of the Matthew text for today. What do you with a parable that talks about mayhem, murder, and smashing things? Elaine was able to nudge out a glimmer of hope from it all and I think the rest of us breathed something of a sigh of relief. I came away, however, more satisfied by the opportunity to gather in community with others to pray and reflect and be with them in a like-minded desire to intentionally bring ourselves into communion with one another and our God. It is nice to know that one is not alone in the question, in the wrestling, in the confusion, disappointment, conflict, and yes, conundrum, of then and now. Jesus, of course, comes up with an even more puzzling rejoinder by which to explain the parable, and the listener/reader is still left shaking their head. In context, Matthew is helpful in pointing out that Jesus is turning his words on the chief priests and Pharisees, and, apparently, they get what he is saying, but what does it have to say to us today? Okay, I thought, let's not get overworked about this—we'll shift our focus to the Ten Commandments.

This, I thought, would be easy as we struggle with how to be in community in the midst of a pandemic that is generating new rules to live by. The Ten Commandments are, as we understand it, Divinely-inspired rules presented in tablet form to the people of the Exodus that enabled them to live respectfully and peaceably in communion with each other—God's response to the mayhem that was the reality of a people feeling lost, out of place, and scratching out a living in the wilderness; all while they travelled together, too close for comfort, in search of a Promised Land. Even a once through reading of the Ten Commandments reveals a community on the edge of reason with unhealthy and life-draining behaviours causing conflict, competition,

division, and yes, even death.

The first five commandments reveal a people turning away from God. The next five are concerned with the people of God living in right relationship with each other. Things had obviously gone awry. Fathers and mothers are being dishonoured, murders are apparently a regular part of daily life, relationships held sacred are being disrespected and abused, and people are stealing, lying, and coveting their neighbours' possessions. Today, it is still possible to discern in our Canadian legal system and rule of law these early Divinely-wrought rules to live by. Most of us are happy to have them in place as they help keep us accountable and respectful of human interactions that build healthy, compassionate, and creative community. Back in the day of Exodus, I am imagining a collective sigh of relief as Moses held up the stone tablets and read out the new rules to live by. I am imagining the light of possibility for a community in conflict transformed by a better vision of living well together. A community changed by rules that first and foremost helped them to understand that as individuals and as a people they mattered to God. Their survival and the fulfilment of their lives mattered to God.

In the thousands of years since, we humans have pushed, pulled, tugged and torn at this connection with the Holy that persists in creating the best for us and out of us. Sadly, we humans haven't lost our ability to create mayhem or find ourselves caught up in mayhem. No one here asked for a pandemic to make a jumble of our lives and, yes, cause the death of so many world-wide. Those in the know are making rules to live by in the hope that we can keep a flattened curve, reduce the stress on our health care systems, reduce the numbers of people falling seriously ill with Covid-19, and the number of deaths associated with the virus. The ultimate hope is a vaccine, and researchers around the globe are pooling their resources to enable this to hopefully happen. There is a Spirit of goodwill present in this grand effort.

Furthermore, no one here asked for all the challenges that you as a community of faith have had to deal with over the last number of months. The disruption to your community of faith has been huge and why not throw in a pandemic just to complicate things further. The breakdown, the disappointment, the conflict, the divisions—it probably feels as if God has turned away or we have been forced to turn away from God. Campbell River United Church has also laid itself bare to the governance structures of the larger church—the Manual has been invoked (a cornerstone of this United Church of ours)—and there is a weird paradox of resistance and gratitude as the parameters we have laid out to live by as a church kick in. It tells me that we matter to God and God matters to us. This is hope, and is recognized in effort from each of us as we wrestle with how we can put our best selves into regrouping, reconciling and making new. Take heart therefore in the sparks of hope witnessed by a newly invigorated Council determined to work through the issues and reconnect the faithful with the spirit, life, and work of CRUC.

Take heart. Today is World Communion Sunday in the midst of a global pandemic. I wonder how many other church communities are linked as we are this morning via Zoom, or in a virtual church community via YouTube, or spread out in small numbers across large sanctuaries being attentive to social distancing and respectful of the vulnerable among us? It isn't the same. Indeed, the pandemic is changing the very nature of who we are and how we congregate. But in these moments of the gathered community, however we are gathered, wherever we are gathered—alone in our dining rooms with a computer screen or separated by six feet and wearing a mask—the common thread that is the Spirit of Christ-with-us binds us as one. In communion, we are remembering the hope we have in Jesus as we break bread and sip juice together. By way of liturgy and prayer, by reflecting on the questions of faith past, present and future, and by our coming together in one Spirit we turn our minds from despair to hope to God.

Rest in this moment, refresh yourself in the Spirit, and discover yourself to be of one Body at the table of Christ. Be transformed, be changed, and become. We are not alone. We live in God's world. Thanks be to God. And, by guess and by golly surely that is what matters! Amen.