



Sermons from Northwood United Church

“Living the Resurrection: Visions of Beloved Community”

Acts 16:9-15, Rev. 21:10, 22-22:5

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

Any of you interested in your family history? Any ever done any genealogy work on your family? Treena has a really neat glassed in box that hangs in our living room with articles from her late father's time in a prisoner of war camp during the Second World War. It's an amazing window into that long past time. Some years ago my Dad did some investigating into our family background, and particularly his grandfather, my great grandfather Frank Sparks, who was part of a surveying expedition into the Yukon, over the Chilkoot pass and down the Yukon River in a mammoth trip that spanned the winter of 1887-1888 with the renowned Surveyor and eventual Commissioner of The Yukon William Ogilvie. Dad knew grandpa was on that expedition but had no idea what it was like. They went up to the Yukon in search of the real story of this expedition, and there in Dawson City they hit the family history jackpot. They found a picture, a notebook, and a collection of letters which together opened up a window into the real story. Grandpa's notebook had lists and dates and temperatures and all kinds of detail. The letters told of hardship and risk and Ogilvie as a hard task master willing to take ridiculous risks to achieve his goal. And the picture? Well that's my great grandpa at age 26, there with his foot up on the gunwale of the scow. What was that trip like? Well there's the picture.

Now if you are asking about our Christian family heritage, and you want to know what it was like for the first Christians, and what Christian community in its earliest form was like, one key place to look is the book of Acts and the go-to passage is the one Gwenda read this morning. Here we have a stunning window into the earliest layer of Christian community outside of Judea and Samaria. It is maybe 20 years at the most after Jesus died. We are in the Roman city of Philippi with its big walls and its gates. And what we are told is that when the apostle Paul went there, he went looking for followers of Jesus where he supposed he would find them, outside the city gates and down by the river. And he was right. There he found a circle of women Jewish Christians and other interested Gentiles like Lydia praying together.

Some background: Philippi was a Roman stronghold in south Eastern Europe and this was a time in which Judaism had a tense relationship with Rome, and followers of Jesus had a tense relationship with their Jewish brothers and sisters. As long as Jews didn't cause trouble, the Romans left them alone, but if they stepped out of line, they felt the full force of Roman control. So any time followers of Jesus emerged in synagogue life, it threatened the tenuous stability. The result is that Christianity was kind of a Jewish underground movement. But it was also popular with anyone on the margins of society.

So this circle of mostly women gathering outside the city gates to pray was this underground charismatic community which had all the markings of counter culture: they shared everything in common, women were prominent, it turns out it attracted slaves, Gentiles. The early Christian term for what we have here is Koinonia, which means communion, an intimate and radical sharing of things- an idealistic community. Koinonia also means a quality of being together that is spiritual and deep and sacred. It is the spiritual heart of what we do around the table. It is also the spiritual heart of what we do in the world. In the book of Acts, we get a picture of our family heritage in Philippi, and it is Koinonia.

That picture becomes the spiritual source for all kinds of idealistic actions by Christians throughout history. It is part of what sparked the vision of the holy city in the book of revelation. It inspired monastic movements throughout our history where people gave all they had to the community and lived together in prayer and work. In Canada, the social gospel roots of the United Church in which we believe our faith needs to shape how we live collectively points back to the Koinonia of early Christianity.

Anybody recognize this quote? "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" Inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty. I'll leave you to speculate about where that vision lives in the collective psyche of our neighbor to the south today, but fact remains, this vision of radical welcome and a place for all, especially the vulnerable is a core inspirational vision in the formation of the nation and it springs in the mind of our fore bearers from early Christian Koinonia.

Which brings me to the refugee project and why we would do this. I want to show you the video of a Skype conversation between Anya and Habib and, the father of the family we are sponsoring.

Today is a significant day and marks a significant moment as the committee on behalf of all of us, signs the papers to make us together with partners, sponsors of the Hammoud family. Why would we, and so many other Christian churches, do this? Is it because it is the Canadian thing to do. Clearly it is the kind thing to do. Well I am here to declare that it is because of our family heritage. It is not just what we do, but who we are. It is because of Lydia and that circle of women and eventually men who became known as Koinonia. It is because Koinonia is in our spiritual DNA- the core drive to share what we have in common and create a community of the marginal. It is because we began as a charismatic collection of radical misfits gathering outside the city walls, living on the edge because that is where we felt God bringing us back to life. We are Koinonia, the community brought back to life after all is lost around simple practices of sharing and breaking bread. We are Koinonia, a community where the titles and labels don't matter: slave or free, woman or man, Jew or Gentile, Christian or Muslim, gay or straight. We are Koinonia because from the time of Lydia and the cluster of women outside the walls of Philippi, to this day when we gather around the table of grace, God makes us Koinonia- beloved community. Amen