Homily for November 15 2020

**“Encourage One Another”**

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

When things are seemingly bleak, it can feel like the end of the world. When, for whatever reason, we are immersed in pain, loss, confusion, chaos, and have just about hit rock bottom, it can feel as if we are drowning in a sea of oil. I expect you can bring to the imagination other substances such as quick-sand or a tangle of webs or perhaps the nightmare sense of falling and falling into a bottomless pit to evoke for you a sense of interminable struggle and no way out. By degrees, I am imagining we have all been there.

Paul, in his first letter to the Thessalonians speaks to the unasked-for unexpectedness of the onset of “sudden destruction.” Paul has a marvellous way with imagery and setting the scene: “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night…‘there is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction…as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape.” I don’t want to dig deeper into Paul’s questionable and probably misogynistic theology at this point, but right now I am imagining anyone listening to this who has given birth is probably experiencing a flash back sort of thing. I remember a look exchanged between my mother and I as my younger sister was preparing to head to the hospital to deliver her first child. “No problem,” she was breezily saying to us, as her husband pulled the car up to the front of the house, “this isn’t nearly as bad as I thought it was going to be.” A number of hours later when we arrived at her hospital bedside to greet a brand-new granddaughter and niece, it was a different story. She raged at us: “why didn’t you tell me it was going to hurt so much!” As Paul states, when that moment comes and the rolling pains of labour start, barring the interventions of modern science, there is no stopping it. Babies are determined to be born. There is no escape.

While I haven’t tended to think of the birthing process as an apocalyptic experience, as I think around that statement, I am now wondering if perhaps it actually is. There is a theology of apocalypse. A belief that there will be sudden destruction followed by the “day of the Lord.” Perhaps the image I am trying to re-create is that of a re-birthing as an opportunity to emerge out of suffering, pain, and chaos into a new beginning. A series of mini-apocalypses that roll through the experience of human life, taking many shapes and forms in our lives, to reveal that as chaotic as things might become there is light at the end of the tunnel. When we are immersed in the chaos that end can be obscured from view and hard to imagine, but it is there, and Paul is reminding us to be awake to it. Essentially, Paul is offering us a faith stance to live through it with an eye to the possibility on the other side.

Being awake to possibility is to give way in faith to an outcome that may or may not be what we expect, and to realize that regardless of what we might wish for or hope for, we may be surprised by something else. We may not always like the outcome, there may be pain and loss, but an outcome there will be, and if we approach it from a position of faith it is possible to live into it with a sense of new direction and with renewed energy. Even in the presence of death there is new life. At services after the loss of a beloved one, I have often expressed a theology that encompasses new life in the Spirit as well as a more down-to-earth perspective directed to those standing around a graveside—for each one there in the presence of death a new chapter of life is beginning. For most, with due attention to grief and a process of grieving, a way will be found to manage the pain of loss and live again—in a new way.

For a people of faith, Paul is offering a way of preparedness. Keep awake to the vision of peace beyond the chaos. Stay sober—that is don’t allow yourselves to succumb to anything that will obscure your way to seeing the truth of things. Clothe yourselves in the enduring protection of God’s love, and wear your faith for all to see. Live with hope, and show that you believe in a transformed future. Paul’s way of faith is then related in specifics—he calls to the people of Christ to be alert to the way of Christ. To lead by way of example and follow the pathway of saving grace. Do it as individuals, in families, as the community of faith, and as you create a sure path towards God’s vision of hope through loving action, encourage one other and build up each other, “as indeed you are doing.”

It is rare that I will spend this much time with Paul. Far too often I get annoyed with some of his directives to the churches as he busily writes away to communities of faith that are in conflict or misappropriating or misrepresenting the gospel he had shared with them in Christ’s name. But there is no denying his persistence and his rallying cry to church communities scattered about the diaspora—exhorting them, encouraging them, reprimanding them, but most often arguing for solutions to emerging issues and concerns that surface in every context. There is no denying Paul’s faith or his persistent belief that living out of that faith gives the community of faith the resources to ride out the very worst life and circumstance can throw at it.

By all accounts, Paul was an odd, misshapened, passionate little man with a propensity to talk a lot and rather loudly, and then write just as much in long, long sentences with a minimum of punctuation. Indeed, it can be hard to read aloud from one of his missives and catch a breath. He began his religious fervour persecuting the people of the Way, and after his Damascus experience gave up persecution to spread and sow the seeds of a gospel of love and saving grace. His was an intense but forgiving ministry, and he poured an abundance of energy into building up healthy communities of faith. There is in all this a message for just about every Christian church community today that is struggling to reconcile and make new. What, I wonder, would Paul have to say to Campbell River United Church, for example, if word had got to him of the struggle and labours we are currently working our way through?

I could make it easy for you and give it a go, but I would rather offer the task to you as something of a homework assignment. What advice, I wonder, would you include in a letter to the church in Campbell River if you were Paul? What concerns would you lift up to be addressed and worked on that would allow you to become even more effective in your ministries of faithfulness, loving kindness, and outreach? What words would you write to encourage and build up the community of faith? It might be very interesting to see what some of you might come up with.

With some irony, 1 Thessalonians 5 begins with Paul suggesting to the Thessalonians that they “do not need to have anything written” to them, for they know for themselves very well. Paul, of course, doesn’t stop there, however, and proceeds to write it all out to make his point. My thought is that here at Campbell River United Church we know very well what we are to be about and understand that we need to clothe ourselves in faith, love, and hope. Following the lead of Paul, we need to find the words to underwrite our story and name a renewed vision for this community of faith as we go forward. This is work that is still ahead of us. And, just as importantly, we must keep awake to Christ and God as we bring into being a vision for Campbell River United Church that bears purpose. By way of encouragement, and in the style of Paul, I exhort you therefore to “encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” The time is yet to come, you are gestating a re-birthing, and there is no escape. That, I think, is enough said for now. Amen.