

SERMON FOR MAY 21, 2017

About six years ago, I experienced a moment that was as exquisitely painful as it was beautiful. It was late June, 2011 and I had just finished my last worship at Munn's United Church, where I had been the minister for 17 years. I stood at the door of my office and looked back at an empty room. Grief washed over me. I was leaving babies that I blessed in the first hours of their lives, later baptized and confirmed. I was leaving couples whom I had married, and couples whom I cared for when marriages ended. I was leaving families that I had held in times of grief, and many joyous celebrations that were vital and hilarious and which created a joyful common life.

Seventeen years of memories washed over me as I stood in that doorway, about to close the door on intimacy, kindnesses given and returned, the challenge of a small church in a growing neighbourhood, opportunities taken and some missed. Over my time at Munn's, I gave much but received much more. And, now I was moving on, and so were they. Now I was closing my office door on what had both defined me and sustained me for almost two decades, and I was turning to face the unknown, the new. I was turning from past to future and in that turning moment I was filled with gratitude and grief.

I don't think that my experience is unusual. I am sure that many of you have known the chaos of emotion that comes with loss-the loss of a beloved to death, the loss of meaningful work, the loss of a dream or desire, the loss of a friend to misunderstanding, the loss of personal integrity to shame, the loss of

community to conflict. We are human, and the pain of endings is part of our human experience. I think that the longing to connect is part of our DNA. Dealing with endings, however, is what we have to learn.

All this came to mind as I struggled with today's scripture. Jesus was heading for Jerusalem where the Jewish religious leaders like Caiaphas had power, where the temple priests had power, and where the Romans had power in their appointed governors like Pilate. I don't think that Jesus knew exactly what would befall him, but whatever lay ahead, it was not good. Like all of us who have had to let go of the familiar and face the future, Jesus knew that leaving his friends and facing his enemies would hurt. It would create pain for them all.

So as the goodbye moment drew closer, John's Jesus chose to care for his friends and their future. He placed in their hand several precious gifts that would help them when the inevitable future was on.

Jesus offers goodbye gifts and goodbye challenges. First, he promises the gift of spirit, the holy and active love that finds us even in the worst circumstances. Jesus calls this active love "Advocate," a presence that would be with the disciples when he was gone.

Our name for "Advocate" is spirit, and my experience is that spirit shows up in people we know. Spirit arrives in visitation lines at funeral homes looking remarkably like dear friends and family. Spirit shows up in a phone call, or a card, or in an email. "I am holding you in the light." Spirit speaks kindness when

a coworker is helped to fix an error rather than be blamed. Spirit speaks when a parent does not berate a child, but teaches a better way. Spirit welcomes with every Parkminster-to-neighbour conversation that happens on Food Truck night. We are the spirit-bearers for one another. Spirit speaks through us.

Jesus also gave the disciples the gift of unity. He calls them to stay connected to him by keeping his commandments: love God with every fiber of your being, and love your neighbour as yourself. As the disciples then, and us, now, love one another, our lives have unity of purpose.

We don't take that unity for granted. We make that one heart-one mind evident every time we celebrate communion. We can't do it enough. All are equal at the table, all equally called to share the bread and cup, all equally welcome, all sharing exactly the same food, all making the same journey to the front, all blessed with the same words of promise. There is blessing for anyone who wants blessing. Nothing separates us at the table: not age, or gender, or sexual orientation, or gender identity, or politics, or privilege, or which side of a church fight we have been on. It doesn't matter what mistakes we have made or are making, or if our hearts are broken and in need of mending. At the table we are one people who have one hope and live by one promise. At the table we know our unity and experience Jesus' promise of connection and hope.

It is no surprise that Jesus hosted the last supper and first communion as he was standing in his own doorway of good bye. As he was facing Jerusalem and as the disciples were facing chaos and loss, he gave them the loaf and cup to

strengthen them for all the endings that were just days away, and to wrap them in love while fear prevailed.

When we are caught in that poignant moment between past and future, we come to the table of belonging and peace and take hold of the gift of loving spirit. It enables us to carry on.