

Raising Each Other's Arms—Exodus 17: 8-13

April 23, 2023—3rd Sunday of Easter

One of the things Heather and I often marvel about Parkminster is the depth and variety of talent among the people here. We especially reflect on the incredible Chairs of Council we've had—Maedith Radlein, Kathy Shortt, Jennifer Allan and now Deb Siertsema. Their dedication, passion for this community, care and insights have made mine and Heather's jobs so much easier and have shepherded Parkminster so ably through transitions and important decisions. They are incredible leaders. But even incredible leaders don't do it alone, they invite people in to share their gifts and they realize when they need help.

I especially think of Kathy and Jennifer's leadership from the onset of the pandemic and how demanding leadership has been in this time—extra meetings, preparation for meetings and the emotional labour of holding the tension between the care and safety of the people of Parkminster, the grief of loss of community and the urge to have church feel normal again. Thank goodness others have stepped up. Like Aaron and Hur supporting Moses many of you held the arms of our leaders high during these past three years. Many of you researched public health guidelines, kept abreast of wastewater findings, researched and drafted policies, set up systems for staying connected with each other, made calls to keep us connected, applied for grants for a/v equipment, installed a/v equipment and more. As fortunate as Parkminster has been to have Kathy and Jennifer as leaders during the most intense times of the pandemic they couldn't have done it without the support and encouragement of many of you. You have been the Aaron and Hur to our leaders during this time.

I reflect on our faith story this morning and how Moses' weary arms are an apt metaphor for his experience as a leader. Can you imagine leading a group of people wandering, searching for home for forty years? The stories of Exodus tell us of near revolts, grumbling, hopelessness. Can you imagine the toll on Moses? The memory of slavery in Egypt is just that, a memory, but the promised land is not yet in sight. Moses is a leader in that most difficult of times, the in-between time. That time between letting go of what we know and arriving where we want or need to be. We've all had those in-between times, caught between what can no longer be and what has yet to be—the time between leaving our parent's home and establishing ourselves in the world, the time between a troubling diagnosis and a treatment plan, the time between a separation or divorce and carving out a new life, the time between moving and feeling settled. In-between times tend to be highly anxious times.

The Church has been there for a long time—caught between the age when church was at the centre of Canadian life and a yet to be realized settling of the place of church in Canadian society. It's a tough place to be for church leaders, it takes its toll. Leaders must deal with their own anxieties in addition to being the lightning rod for the anxieties of others. As churches navigate these times seeking their purpose and place in a

rapidly secularizing society in addition to so many other societal changes leaders are pulled in so many directions. It can be easy to get distracted, to lose yourself.

In my sabbatical plan I shared my own struggle with this. I shared how as a church leader I often experience a dissonance between the secular value of success and its poor cousin, survival, and the gospel of Jesus the Christ. It is daunting and difficult to keep love (self-sacrificial, uncomfortable, unpredictable) at the centre when the secular value of success (ego-centred, comfortable, predictable) has been adopted and become ingrained in church culture. As a leader, this situation is troubling because I so want the people I minister with to experience release from the anxiety of success and to experience instead the freedom of grace. I constantly wonder what congregational life would be like if the only question we ever asked was simply, "what does love look like in this particular circumstance?" And, if this were the only question we ask, what if the only skill we worked on developing and honing were discernment?

The sabbatical is an opportunity for me to re-connect with this core or essence of ministry in the midst of this in-between time. I think of that poem by Chuang Tzu: "Poem of the Woodcarver" in which a carver who crafted a work of art, a bell stand responds to a Prince who is amazed by its beauty and wants to know the carver's secret. In the poem the carver replies,

... "I am only a workman:
I have no secret. There is only this:
When I began to think about the work you commanded
I guarded my spirit, did not expend it
On trifles, that were not to the point.
I fasted in order to set
My heart at rest.
After three days fasting,
I had forgotten gain and success.
After five days
I had forgotten praise or criticism.
After seven days
I had forgotten my body
With all its limbs.

"By this time all thought of your Highness
And of the court had faded away.
All that might distract me from the work
Had vanished.
I was collected in the single thought
Of the bell stand.

Chuang Tzu is describing this total immersion in the task, a letting go of ego, a humble

focus on what matters most. That's what sabbatical allows for, re-connecting with the heart of the task that is ministry—the realignment of the soul with the role of ministry. Thank you for giving me the space and time to re-connect with the heart of my calling and our calling together. Thank you to those of you who share in leadership at Parkminster. Thank you for the ways in which you hold up the arms of Parkminster's leaders. Thank you for holding up my arms with this sabbatical and putting the supports in place to hold up Heather's arms as she continues to minister during this time. We are not alone our creed says. Thank you for putting flesh on these words.

Rev. Joe Gaspar