

## THE GIFT OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

### All Saints – Cycle B: John 11:32-44

All our readings today were born in a community of the faithful. The reading from Isaiah's prophecy dates from a time approximately 700 years before the birth of Christ: the author writes during years of moral, spiritual, and political struggle in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The prophet lived and wrote during the reign of four different kings, Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. His vision of the great feast of the Lord on the last day when all God's faithful would come to Jerusalem in joy and thanksgiving was born of the community's deep yearning for a positive outcome to what everyone knew was a downward spiral politically and economically. Judah was weak and could easily fall prey to the political and military aggression of its neighbours. The prophet envisions a death shroud spread over the people which only God can remove; he envisions Judah's fall, a disgrace only God can reverse. Isaiah's vision of the great feast when the peoples' present suffering will be healed articulates for us and for his original readers faith in the One who saves and redeems, the One who seeks out the downhearted, walks with them, and leads them into blessing. Isaiah's vision is the antidote to the spiritual poverty people experience when losses accumulate and hope is but a memory. Isaiah writes from the faith community to the faith community, reminding them of who God is and who they are because of God's unbounded love.

Fast forward 800 years, and the author of the Book of Revelation carries the same message to a community of Christian communities, "the seven churches that are in Asia" (we recognize them as cities in present-day Turkey). Christians are oppressed and "slaughtered for the word of God and the testimony they had given." Their suffering is real and the one we call John of Patmos draws on his thorough knowledge of Hebrew scripture to tell them, as Isaiah told them, that God's word of restoration and renewal and resurrection is the final word. Jerusalem will be as a bride in God's realm, not the whore that is Rome. And as God's mercy was present to wipe away every tear from the people of Judah generations before, so God's mercy will do the same for those who weep over persecution and loss because of holding firmly to the gospel of Jesus Christ. John interprets God's incarnation in Christ Jesus as the ultimate sign of God's solidarity with those who suffer and lose their way: he writes, "See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them...Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." John of Patmos writes from the faith community to the faith community reminding them of who God is and who they are because of God's unbounded love revealed in the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In this morning's Gospel, we are presented with yet another message of hope grounded in the knowledge of God's unbounded power and love. In this account, the community is much smaller and the suffering affects a small family in Bethany, their close friends, and the community of Jesus' first disciples. Lazarus, Jesus' dear friend and the brother of Mary and Martha, also Jesus' dear friends, has died. The situation is beyond hope: the narrator tells us that Lazarus has been dead for four days; people believed the soul left the body after three days. Even for Jesus, the author is saying, the situation is final.

Twice John tells us that Jesus is greatly disturbed and begins to weep. John reports that those who had gathered interpret Jesus' tears as tears of love for Lazarus; but in doing so, John allows his readers to reflect on their observation. It is the only instance in any of the gospels in which Jesus breaks down. Certainly for those who doubted Jesus' full humanity, this event is clear evidence to the contrary.

In a scene that prefigures the Resurrection, we learn that there is a stone in front of Lazarus' tomb which Jesus commands to be rolled away. Martha protests: whatever Jesus has in mind is just too horrible for her to contemplate. But then Jesus prays aloud in order, as he says, to provide a frame of reference for all present for the miracle that is about to take place. He prays, "Father, I thank you for having heard me...but I [pray] now so that they may believe that you sent me." The power is God's, Jesus teaches through his prayer, not his own, although without question many will misconstrue and use this incident as yet another reason to fear him. Jesus raises his voice and calls, "Lazarus, come out!" and the unimaginable takes place. Lazarus comes forth from the tomb, still in his grave clothes. God's love and power, John tells us before he tells us of Christ's resurrection, is unbounded. The community of believers is a community whose faith, he is saying, must come to terms with who God is and who we are because of God's great power and deep love.

This year has been an unusual year for me in contemplating the gift of Christian community, especially in the face of death. We have lost through death so many who have been part of this congregation or connected to this congregation through their extended families. Shortly after our 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we gathered for the funeral of our founding pastor, the Rev. Roy Grosz who for me had provided so much guidance and wisdom during my 18 years as your present pastor. But, in fact, everyone we remember this morning had become my dear friends through the love and care that is, without question, the enduring sign of this congregation. When George Mayer was our pastor, we gathered around the slogan "Christ cares" because it found resonance not only with the faith we live and proclaim through our life together, but because it is precisely how we understand the mission of our congregation. The sorrow many of us feel over the absence of those who stopped worshipping with us after our May vote on full inclusion is community sorrow because we care for them not only as individuals but as those who have left our community of faith. We can't help ourselves from caring and loving and mourning their loss. For our community, their absence has the value of death, even though we know they are all well and not beyond the love of God. But we miss them and we pray for them – because we care; Christ cares; Christ Lutheran Church cares; and we pray that in the grace and power and love of Christ, like Lazarus, they will come forth.

But beyond this particular grief, we bear within and among us precisely the message that Isaiah and John of Patmos and John the Evangelist bore for their communities: that in the great sway of God's love, we are all loved and cared for and cherished and saved; that we were for Kim and Dolly and Gertie and Roy, Marian, Elwin, and Vera a sign of God's promise in, for Christians, Jesus Christ. And when we take the long view, they were that for us in their time on earth and as part of this community.

This past summer I had an experience that helped me understand personally the gift of Christian community. As most of you know, for the past three summers I have served part of each as the visiting minister for St. John's Church of Scotland in Gourrock. In addition to preaching every Sunday, I also give pastoral care to the members of St. John's – home visits, hospital visits, and funerals. One of the members, Marie, had been undergoing cancer treatment in one of the Glasgow hospitals, and it was anticipated she would be transferred to the Western Infirmary in Glasgow where I could visit her. I was able to contact her family to arrange for my visit: they told me she was very weak after the treatments, and her doctors had suggested they stay close. But it was not easy for them, because none of them lived in Glasgow: each day, they made the long commute from home or work and back. On the day of my first visit, her family were just on their way home after spending a very long afternoon at Marie's bedside. I told them I would spend some time with her and not to worry about leaving as soon as I arrived; I would visit with them another day.

I entered Marie's room, and although we had only met once before, two years previous after Sunday worship, she knew immediately that the love and care of her beloved congregation had found her, even though she was miles away from home and her real minister, Glenn, was here in Waterloo on the other side of the ocean.

We talked and prayed together, and I held her hand. She was weak, and I realized that her doctors had been wise in suggesting her family keep vigil. I visited twice more that same week, and on one of those visits did spend some time getting to know her family. But on each of those three visits, I spent an hour or more alone with Marie, not talking, just holding her hand, praying for her comfort and peace at the last. Her room had a large window, and as I sat at her bedside, the magnificent 18<sup>th</sup> century tower of the even older University of Glasgow filled the window frame. As Paris has the Eiffel Tower, as New York has the Empire State and Chrysler buildings, and as Toronto has the CN Tower, so Glasgow has this tower at its university as its most recognizable icon. No other landmark could have made me more aware of how far away from home I was at that time; nor how far away Marie was from the warmth and love of her home and her beloved church in Gourrock.

And then, I thought about Marie and me, strangers to one another really, but in that moment the best of friends, spending some of the last hours of her earthly life together; friends in Christ. I have done the same for countless others, but they were almost always people I knew from Canadian congregations I have served as pastor or intern. Glasgow and Marie were a world apart, and yet it was so appropriate that this ministry of Christian companionship take place at this time and in this place. I realized that I

represented not only Glenn, but Marie's church and its love for her. It didn't matter to her that I wasn't Glenn or that I was a Lutheran pastor from Canada: all that mattered was the sign, intention of care, and my presence.

And in this reflection, I saw a Christian community that is as large as our world; I saw a Christian community whose love is able to transcend geography and denomination and culture. It was an experience from faith community to faith community, proclaiming hope and resurrection and new life, even in the face of death. It reminded Marie and me of who God is and who we are because of God's unbounded love.