

ON MOTHERS, SHEPHERDS, AND CONGREGATIONS

Easter 3 – Year A: Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

Pastor Eric Reble, Pastoral Intern André Lavergne, and I landed at St. Peter's, Kitchener within months of each other as new leaders of an old congregation. I served St. Peter's as Director of Music, but Pastor Eric very graciously included me as a full member of the leadership team. Unlike most old congregations, St. Peter's did not have an old church building: when the three of us arrived on the scene: the building was only 12 years old – shiny, beautiful, impressive, and larger-than-life. After a few months, we recognized that the new building was not the essence of the congregation, even though it had become its dominant symbol. Unlike the building in which they worshipped, we discovered that the people of St. Peter's were humble, warm, caring, and relational – more of a large family in which everyone was known and everyone was appreciated. It was not a big church with a big ego; but when others spoke of St. Peter's, they jokingly called it "the Vatican," – again, referring to the building – its scale, the great slabs of grey stone on both the exterior and interior of the Sanctuary, and generally, the architectural drama it brought to the cityscape of downtown Kitchener.

Eric was interested in changing the congregation's strong identification with the steel, glass, and stone by which it was known. One of the first things he proposed was removing a photograph of the Queen Street façade as the cover of the Sunday order of service and replacing it with something that more accurately communicated the living, breathing, caring congregation inside the building. I suggested that we ask artist Robin Baird Lewis to come up with a few drawings to consider as our new bulletin cover: Eric liked the idea, and gave me the green light on connecting with her.

Robin came up with two or three drawings, the winning design being a pen-and-ink of people gathering for worship on a much-softened rendering of the stone, steel, and glass of the Queen Street entrance. She made St. Peter's look warm and inviting. Her favourite drawing, however, didn't make the cut because Eric, André, and I thought it might be too much of a challenge for some who didn't want to make the new building disappear entirely as an icon of the congregation. And so, the softened rendering of the Queen Street entrance with people gathering for worship became the image that greeted members and visitors alike each Sunday morning for several years. Robin's drawing that Eric, André, and I really liked, however, was of a mother, sitting in a rocking chair with a baby on her lap and two or three other of the little one's siblings playing on the floor at the mother's feet, with one of the three climbing up to find a place for herself on her mother's lap, alongside the baby.

Robin challenged all of us with this drawing, reminding us that a church's first call is to gather, love, and nurture its members; to recognize the feminine in a religion where male symbolism predominates; to offer a radical alternative to thinking of churches as buildings when we know that buildings are just buildings. The church is a people, a community of faith, a family which, at its best approximates the magnificent example we have in this morning's reading from Acts 2. Tradition also suggests that the church is like a mother – loving, caring, nurturing, teaching, leading, guiding her children; equipping them to become mature and responsible adults. It is an image we might wish to borrow for this congregation as we grow in self-understanding.

One of the members of St. Peter's, also an artist, was working with another image based on Jesus' teaching from today's Gospel and the verses that follow it in John 10, the verses that have Jesus declare himself not only as the gate of the sheepfold, but also as the good shepherd. Carl Clem's vision for the people of St. Peter's was a vision for mission. He designed his Jesus the Good Shepherd sculpture for the great stone wall behind the altar at St. Peter's – Jesus, crook in hand, leading the congregation out of the building. His design was accepted, but not for the altar wall. The congregation had already contracted Nancy-Lou Patterson of Saint Columba Church to design the richly-coloured, quilted tapestry which, interestingly, became the a subsequent Sunday bulletin cover for the congregation. Carl's sculpture was eventually mounted on the outside entrance of St. Peter's Chapel – no longer leading the Christian flock from the building and into the streets, but rather inviting people to gather inside the building. The prophetic voice of the sculpture was, unfortunately, muted through its relocation. Somehow, Ayrton Kipp was given a stained glass rendering of Carl's sculpture which his family gave me after his death in 2008.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, it is good for us to have not only the suggestion of the church as a loving mother with her children gathered round her, but also the church as Jesus' flock whom he not only guards and protects, but also leads out of our sanctuaries to be the church without walls; the church in mission, in other words.

And it is this church on the road or, more accurately, the Hebrew people travelling through the wilderness for 40 years, that is conjured up in the beloved Psalm 23, our appointed psalm on this Fourth Sunday of Easter. Moses led the people out of Egypt into a wilderness in which food and water were in short supply. But the people were nurtured and protected by the grace and love of God; and the image from Psalm 23 of a banquet table of food in the wilderness, in the presence of enemies, honours their experience of God's providence in their long wilderness journey. Eventually, God shepherds them into the land of promise, the psalmist suggests, where they lie down in green pastures and drink from still waters.

The American singer=composer Bobby McFerrin loves this psalm, and associates it with his mother. He identifies a mother's love and the love of the Good Shepherd as one, and in a song he dedicated to his mother and written only five or six years ago, he makes the substitution in order to bring the two images together. He wrote,

The Lord is my Shepherd, I have all I need,
She makes me lie down in green meadow,
Beside the still water, She will lead.
She restores my soul, She rights my wrongs,
She leads me in a path of good things,
And fills my heart with songs.
Even though I walk through a dark and dreary land,
There is nothing that can shake me.
She has said She won't forsake me,
I'm in her hand.
She sets a table before me, in the presence of my foes,
She anoints my head with oil,
And my cup overflows.
Surely, surely goodness and kindness will follow me
All the days of my life,
And I will live in her house
Forever, forever and ever.
Glory be to our Mother, and Daughter,
And to the Holy of Holies.
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,
World without end. Amen.

There are several YouTube videos and audio recordings of Bobby McFerrin's 23rd Psalm. The music is hauntingly beautiful.

Yesterday, our Church Council and a few of our committee chairs spent six hours in retreat at Hidden Acres Camp and Conference Centre in New Hamburg. Among other things, we spent some time with this morning's First Reading from the second chapter of Acts – the passage that describes the apostolic

church immediately after Pentecost as an ideal community living the gospel of Jesus Christ, even to the point of individuals selling all their possessions and goods, holding all things in common, and distributing the proceeds to all as needs arose. It is a vision of the church as a family living courageously, generously, and extravagantly in the hostile environment of first-century Jerusalem. We were inspired by Luke's description of the early church with images of family, mothering, and shepherding appearing between the lines. Retreat Leader Nancy Kelly proposed a Season of Listening as our next step in determining appropriate expressions of our congregational ministry and mission. Her suggestion found resonance with us, and inspired us to appropriate the spirit of the apostolic church, its freshness, its courage, and its extravagant love to be the heart of our congregational outreach. The church can have a mother's love; the church can provide the gentle leadership and fierce protection of a good shepherd. The church can be a community in which every challenge and every blessing of the gospel is embodied, shared, and given away for the love of the world.

The church is not a building. The church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place. The church is a people – inspired by a Mothering God, a Shepherding God, and Christ Jesus who came that we may have life, and have it abundantly.