

May 24, 2020 The Church Empowered for Witness Acts 1:6-14 Rev. Ross Leckie Caledon East U Church

On a sunny morning last July, retired businessman, Alan Mulholland left Summerside, PEI on his 26' sailboat, named 'Wave Rover' for the dream of his life, a two to three year sail around the world. After making the first shakedown voyage from PEI with a friend, making sure everything was working right, Alan then left on his own from Port Hawkesbury, Nova Scotia bound for the Azores islands. In Port Hawkesbury, his wife and two friends stayed back on shore, waved him off, and watched as the boat 'fading' into the horizon. He was bound for the Atlantic ocean and beyond.

I wonder if that was anything like those eleven men and a few fellow travelers who stood on a Palestinian hillside and watched in amazement as their teacher, their mentor, their leader disappeared into the clouds? You might expect that after three years and a bit of travel, after the gruesome crucifixion and the unbelievable resurrection experience, they might have grown beyond being amazed at what would come next in their life with Jesus. Perhaps they said among themselves, "Wow, wasn't that amazing to experience." For a few of them, it probably brought back memories of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop. While they were gazing into heaven, two men in white robes said to them, "Why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." So, they returned to Jerusalem to wait as they had been instructed, to see what amazing thing would happen next.

There are two notable things they did while they waited: they stayed together (including some women, mother Mary, and Jesus' brothers), and they prayed. Seminary professor, William Willimon reminds us, "Waiting, an onerous burden for us computerized and technically impatient moderns who live in an age of instant everything, is one of the tough tasks of the church. Our waiting implies that the things which need doing are beyond our ability to accomplish solely by our own effort, our programs and crusades. Some other empowerment is needed, therefore the church waits and prays."

This group, gathered on the hillside and then in the upper room, were real human beings, with names, identities, histories, and hopes. They followed Jesus as far as they could; then they waited for the coming of the Spirit. This was the beginning of the first church. Times have changed radically, but it is still real human beings, men and women with names, identities, histories, and hopes, who gather to wait for the coming of the Spirit. This congregation is in a time of transition. We find ourselves in this changed reality of a pandemic with all of the uncertainty that brings. Will we be able to worship as we did before? Will I be able to sit in my favourite pew with my loved ones close by? Will social distancing become the way of life?

At that point Jesus' followers didn't know where things would go next. Would Jesus be back to them soon? Were they supposed to hang together in Jerusalem until he returned? How could they afford to leave their old ways of fishing, farming, and cabinet making? Should only a few of them try to carry on where Jesus had left off, and the rest of them return to their former livelihoods, contributing to the costs of those first missionaries?

At this point we don't know how worship and the work of the church will look in 6 months or a year? And this is a time of leadership change too. We gather today to pray for the coming of the Spirit in our own lives and in the life of this congregation at this time, in this time of change and this time of decision-making. Those followers—and we—pray for understanding, wisdom, guidance, strength to go on. They--and we—pray in hope and fear, in faith and doubt, in obedience and wonder.

What lay ahead for them? They had anticipated the kingdom of Israel restored in all its ancient power and glory, that's what they had always been told a Messiah would do. But, this Jesus, he kept talking about the 'kingdom of God'. Those were not the same things. The Jesus' version they had learned about, was here and now, **but not yet**. Jesus spent his post-resurrection time with them reinforcing all he had tried to teach them about that 'reign of God'. They would not be driving out the Romans, throwing out the religious authorities and become rich and powerful themselves. The realm of

God would be ushered in through the works of their hands, the insight of their minds, and the journeys of their feet.

Commentator, William Barclay offers this, “by the Kingdom Jesus meant a society upon earth where God’s will would be as perfectly done as it is in heaven. Because of that very fact it would be a Kingdom founded on love and not on power.” So this coming reign of God will be characterized by love and its cousins, compassion and justice, not power and privilege, wealth or might.

I’ve told you on occasion about my experience in Brampton from 2003-2016. I was invited to a Saturday visioning meeting where about 15 people were challenged to re-invigorate a ministry to the marginalized which was floundering and had a poor reputation in the community. Grace United Church stepped up to be a part of that re-invigorating in a small way—opened up the kitchen and served a breakfast one morning a week. That ministry which has only one aspect ‘housed’ at Grace has grown and blossomed and mushroomed in size over the last 17 years under the good leadership of Pentecostal minister, the Rev. Ted Brown, dedicated staff and hundreds of volunteers involved in the work every week. Those volunteers come from churches of all kinds and people of faith beyond the Christian family and those who claim no faith, other than caring for their neighbour in need.

I spoke this past week with the current chair of the Board, Anglican priest, Father Byron Gilmour. He told me about the other two locations of Regeneration Outreach. One of those is at the former Sears warehouse on Queen street east. That space was transformed into a thrift store in this last year. Once the reality of this pandemic set in, it became obvious to Ted Brown that the daily food needs of the marginalized in Brampton was nearing a crisis. A few medium size agencies decided they would close during the pandemic. The decision was made to expand the relatively small Food Bank of Regeneration. They already had so many connections with the wider food distribution network in the GTA where they sourced food for the meals served at Grace. I learned that at this time there are 500 families in Brampton being supported by the work of Regeneration Outreach. If you go there you will now find the large warehouse building being fully utilized. You will see two tractor trailers in the parking lot fully utilized, one of them a refrigerated unit. A few months ago the organization wondered whether they could actually keep the thrift store running because the costs were too high. Now, in this time of crisis the organization has gained the renewed confidence of city officials, the new challenges are bringing forth the gifts of many new volunteers and they are receiving funds from new sources to keep the charitable work flourishing. I was only a small part of that wonderful story of God’s unfolding and directing a mission for the church. I could never have dreamed what it has become today.

After almost three months of ‘lockdown’ things are beginning to open up once again under new routines. Will we use this opportunity to name new priorities for ourselves and our communities? Will we take this opportunity to realize the shortcomings to the way we were living? Will we address the inequities we have seen in the care of the elderly? Will we have more consideration for those left out? Will our decisions be based on what is best for the collective society and less on what is best for the individual?

We may think that it is difficult enough to take care of ourselves, while trying to follow society’s rules and culture’s expectations, without getting hung up on seeking God’s will. Nevertheless, doing God’s will is what Jesus called his followers to do; calls us to do. We are called to center ourselves in God and God’s will. We must listen for the voice of love and wrap ourselves in “its empowering cloak.”

The experience of the ‘aftermath’ of the Ascension recognizes the central place of community in the life of the church. It is not enough to go it alone. They met, traveled, and worked together. We too must meet, travel, and work together in Christ’s name. We need each other’s gifts, each other’s witness, support, challenge, and care, in order to live into the possibilities and expectations of ‘God’s realm’, for today. Amen.

Acknowledging inspiration from:

Mixon, Randle R., Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 2, 2010, p.520-24