

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 19, 2020
"I GIVE THANKS FOR YOU" (*I Corinthians 1:1-9*)

Take a look at the cover of your leaflet. What do you see? A goblet? Two faces? Both? Do you remember the first time you were shown such a picture? If you were like me, you were utterly convinced it was one thing and one thing only. You needed someone else to point out the other image. Maybe, you have gotten more adept, more wary, and automatically search for a couple of very different images like that of an old woman and a young girl. Still, we may get caught out. At the centre of her desk, a friend of mine displayed a narrow strip of dark wood with pieces of light wood glued on in what I thought was a decorative pattern - interesting, but why give it such a prominent place? Imagine my chagrin when I realized that if I focused on the dark bits, I would see the name, Jesus.

We may assume we are seeing absolutely everything, but are we missing something? Are we only seeing half of the picture? When I was settled on Valley Charge in Southern Manitoba, I naively assumed that since the three congregations shared a minister, they would have a common vision of their ministry and mission. They would be used to working together gladly, freely. Was I wrong! Not only did Emerson, Greenridge and Dominion City have their own unique personalities, but each was willing to fight the other to to the death over times of service and the percentage they had to contribute to the charge budget. By the time my first season of Epiphany rolled around, I was fed up with the lot of them. I couldn't think of one nice thing to say about my settlement. Why had the national church in its wisdom placed me here?

I opened my Bible to I Corinthians. I read: "I give thanks to God always for you." I stared in disbelief. You see, I knew that Corinth was no more a perfect congregation than my three. They may have been a small group of people meeting in one location, but that did not mean they were of one heart, one mind. They may have had Paul, **the** apostle to the Gentiles, not an ordinand from the East, but that did not mean they were happy. In Corinth, there were complaints about Paul and his leadership, and misbehaviour in the congregation. Paul would have been well within his rights if he had said: "I shake the dust of Corinth off my feet. They are enough to try the patience of a saint."

In our society, we are trained to be critical. In Grade School, do you remember being shown a series of pictures, and being asked: "which one is different?" This was to hone our observation skills. Do you recall answering the question: "what is wrong with this sentence"? This was designed to improve our grammar. Did you ever participate in a public speaking contest or a science fair or a school choir competition, and listen to the judge's comments? This was the best speech / project / choir because... In a democracy, these critiquing, judging skills are important. We don't want citizens who believe their leaders are always right and blindly follow. In an age of rapid change when all of us need to keep learning, we might lose the incentive to improve if we didn't recognize how we fall short.

However, this critiquing and judging may be carried to such extremes that we fail to notice, let alone acknowledge, the good things, and can only point out the faults in others, and the problems in an organization. I have long been a

supervisor of ministry students, and have usually found the experience interesting, challenging and a lot of fun. But not this one summer. My intern had barely arrived on the pastoral charge when she observed: "You do not have a prayer group." I agreed, but pointed out we did have UCWs whose meetings included worship and prayer; there were Bible study groups gathering weekly who started and ended with prayer. "Humpf", she responded: "you cannot be a real church without a prayer group." Just like that she had judged us and found us wanting. That was only the first of many shortcomings she identified. Not surprisingly, she was not happy in her internship, and was usually complaining about someone or something.

Have you met anyone like my intern or like Margaret, a resident, at my Mom's retirement facility? Margaret's face always looks like a thunder cloud. Nothing is any good - there are no enjoyable activities; the food is not tasty; the staff aren't helpful. No matter what anyone might say - "Isn't it a lovely day to be out on the patio"; "there's an ice cream social in the pub; there's entertainment in the theatre" - she would keep on scowling and just shake her head. I acknowledge that both my intern and this resident may be extreme examples, but are there not times in all of our lives when we seem unable to focus on anything, but the negative? That was me halfway through my first year on Valley Charge: why couldn't they be more harmonious and open to new ideas; when were they ever going to make a decision; how could anyone survive living in the manse in Emerson where everyone noticed how many weeds I had in my vegetable

garden; when my curtains opened in the morning, and who came to visit me and how late they stayed?

Along comes Paul with his: "I give thanks to God always for you." I was startled. I felt as if someone had just pointed out that the sign I had always assumed was just a strange pattern of glued on pieces of wood actually said "Jesus". I was reminded that God did not create us to live in lonely isolation but in community. Ours is a communal, not a solitary faith. I grew up in the church - St. John's in Oakville and the Donway-Covenant in Don Mills. I never thought that much about it until I found myself at age 22 living by myself in Buenos Aires, the sprawling capital of Argentina. During the week, there was my job in the Visa Section of the Canadian Embassy to keep me occupied. I had my Canadian supervisor and the young Argentine female staff for company. But on the weekends, I was all alone. There was nothing to distract me from feeling how much I missed my family and friends, the trees, and lakes and fields of Canada. One Sunday, I wandered into a little Methodist Church. The English speaking congregation comprised of Brits, Aussies, Americans and Anglo Argentines shared the space with both a Spanish and a Korean language congregation. You should have heard the cacophony when the three came together and sang! It was a small group but they drew me in. I was invited out to lunch after the service. I became part of their Saturday Bible Study group. Their theology didn't always mesh with mine and politically, we usually disagreed. But I don't know how I would have survived the storms in my personal and professional life without them.

There is no perfect community of faith. Not for Paul who founded the first congregations. Not for us who can look back on almost 2000 years of church history. There is no perfect minister. When I was first ordained, my Mom delighted in telling everyone: "I used to think ministers were perfect, but then my daughter became one." It is easy to find faults and flaws, but are we seeing the whole picture? What if we change our focus? Might we also notice good points and strengths? Yes, the Board at Greenridge moved at a glacial pace in making decisions, but they had mastered the art of achieving consensus. Recognizing it was highly unlikely any of them would move off the family farm, knowing they would always be neighbours, they appreciated the importance of consulting everyone, of making sure all were on board. Yes, the music might not be up to the standard of a downtown Toronto church with its paid leads and pipe organ, but the guitarist at Greenridge put real feeling into his rendition of "Come to the Church in the Wildwood"; the organist at Dominion City played totally by ear with spirit and enthusiasm; the choir in Emerson had no men, but sang beautifully in two parts. Yes, I was living in a goldfish bowl, but where else would people insist I just drop in for dinner if I was driving by or check to make sure I got home safely in the winter? So why was I complaining?

"I give thanks to God for you always." It had never crossed my mind that I would come to Sharon-Hope. For me, Susan's phone call came out of the blue. But you have been a God-send. I thank God that you are a preaching congregation. By this I mean, you expect a meaty sermon, and you respond, giving me fresh energy. I thank God that you have Donna, a really good

musician, and choir who are willing and able to handle a variety of music, and sing choral introits and anthems which add to the beauty and depth of worship. I thank God for Margaret, your Office Administrator. On my student charge, I had to prepare my own worship leaflet: I cut a stencil on a manual typewriter, and ran it on a Gestetner. Here, Margaret not only looks after all this, but also answers my questions, and keeps me organized. I thank God for your Team leaders who are willing to discuss their ministries and fund raisers who jump into organizing an elegant tea, baking apple pies and making a turkey dinner. Amazing. What would you give thanks for in your community of Sharon-Hope?

As human beings, it is tempting to use our skills in critiquing and judging to identify the faults and flaws in individuals and groups. As people of faith, created to be in relationship, we are also invited to focus on the good things and give thanks to God for the gift of community.