

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, MAY 3, 2020
“ONE FOR ALL” *(Acts 2: 42-47)*

It was billed as a potentially life changing experience. And this Outward Bound trip lived up to the hype. For six days, twelve of us plus our two leaders made our way by canoe down the White River into Lake Superior - paddling, running rapids, portaging, setting up and taking down our camp. We started off as strangers who appeared to have little, if anything, in common. We began as competitive individuals eager to be the swiftest climbing the rock face, the best at starting a campfire, the strongest at carrying heavy packs over rough trails. We ended up as the White River Rats, committed to succeeding as a group, ready to pool whatever skills we had for the good of all, willing to share each other's burdens.

The people described by the author of Luke / Acts have not been on Outward Bound, but they too have gone through a life altering experience. They have listened to Peter share the good news that Jesus, the long awaited messiah, has been raised from the dead - love is indeed stronger than hate, good than evil, life than death. They have asked: "what should we do", and received the answer: become part of a community of learning, fellowship, breaking bread, and prayer. Theirs is not a solitary journey with the focus on their personal relationship with Jesus. Theirs is a journey of discovering and growing, of giving and receiving in company with their brothers and sisters in Christ, and in relationship with the whole of creation.

Scholars have questioned the historical accuracy of this description of First Church Jerusalem. Were there really 3,000 people added after a single sermon? Did more men and women keep joining day by day? Did they actually hold all things in common as on present day Hutterite colonies or were some reluctant to part with their

possessions? Regardless of whether this portrait has been photo shopped to hide the warts and wrinkles, it still has something to say to us today, particularly in this time of global pandemic.

Individuals who would never have been part of the same social circle, who have no obvious connections, come together. They are not an instant community. Relationships must be formed. As we came to identify ourselves as White River Rats so they come to see themselves as followers of the way, as people who claim Jesus as lord and friend, as companion and guide, as healer and teacher. This happens first through the story telling of the disciples, now called apostles meaning “sent ones”. The apostles share tales of the Jesus they knew and loved from walking along the winding roads of Galilee, from watching him heal, from listening to his parables, from sharing conversations around dinner tables. With repetition, these become stories not only for those who were actually present, but also for the women and men, the youth and children who come afterwards. They are our stories - stories which bind us together. We may not all have grown up in Sharon-Hope; we may have varied interests and occupations; we may belong to different generations, each with their own values and understanding of what is important, but we all share the same scriptures. As the centuries rolled on, more stories were added, giving us our identities as Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, as members of a particular denomination and congregation. Part of coming into a new community of faith is learning its stories, and their becoming our own. When she arrives on July first, what stories are you going to tell Rev. Sadekie about Sharon-Hope?

Stories and teaching help to form our identity. So does fellowship as together in community, we try to walk in God's ways. During this time of pandemic, we are hearing a lot of: "we are all in this together". We are being encouraged to become more aware of each other. When we go for a walk, it is not enough to focus on our own path - we need to notice the dog walker approaching, and the jogger coming up beside us, and do what I like to call our COVID dance - taking steps to make sure we keep our physical distance. Even when we are isolating in our own homes, we can still think of our neighbours - are they able to get everything they need; are they feeling lonely - and reach out through a phone call, a text, an email, a care package deposited on their door step. (By the way, the people of Sharon-Hope United Church are doing an excellent job of connecting and looking out for each other!) As we hear the reports of outbreaks amongst the homeless, of families struggling to pay the rent and put food on the table, of seniors warehoused in long term facilities with four to a room, and only curtains to divide, we can consider how we might offer help right now, and what changes we might work for in the future to make systems more just and equitable.

The people drawn into this first Christian community are learning to change from a "me" to an "us" focus. They are discovering their own gifts and skills and recognizing those of others, and how they can be shared in community. They are experiencing the joy of both giving and receiving. This involves a fundamental transformation. As young children we tend to claim people and things as our own. When my niece, Kate, was about three or four, she was talking about "my Daddy". I pointed to Keith and said: "he's my brother." "No", Kate protested: "he's my Daddy!" Again I pointed to Keith and said: "he's Grandma's son." Kate became even more indignant: "No, he's my Daddy!!" My

Mom intervened with a sharp: “Linda, stop teasing the child!” I admit, I was delighting in getting her riled up, but as I reflected afterwards, I realized this possessiveness is not something we automatically leave behind with adulthood. We may look at the people in our lives as my family, my friends, my congregation, and be reluctant to open that tight circle to others. We may regard what we have as the result of our hard work: we have earned it; we deserve it; we need to keep as much of it as possible to care for our own and safeguard our future.

These people in Jerusalem are holding “all things in common”. They are selling “their possessions and goods” and distributing “to all as any had need”. This may be an idealized image, but it underlines that when God encounters human beings, when we experience the steadfast, unconditional love of God, something fundamental shifts inside of us. Receiving that love, we want to respond to the giver. We want to extend that same love and acceptance to those around us. We start to realize: our lives are gifts from God; the people in our lives were God’s beloved before they ever came into ours. God graciously lends them to us for a time. The world around us - “the sunlit sky, the moon, the wildflower’s growing” - are not for us to own and claim as ours. They like us are part of the one web of life God spins. As our thinking shifts, as we begin to see that everything we are and have are gifts from God so does our willingness to share with one another.

Stories and fellowship form us into community. The author of Acts chooses to mention a third factor: “breaking of bread”. Our minds may immediately go to communion - the sacrament where we remember Jesus’ last supper with his disciples, rejoice in our present membership in the one body of Christ, and look to the messianic

banquet where there is room for all and everyone has a place. However, this is also a reference to the sharing of ordinary meals. Right now, we may only be able to have a virtual coffee hour on Sunday and virtual tea times during the week, but we know the value of getting together over food and drink. When I was first settled in Manitoba, I would drive around my pastoral charge and simply drop in for visits. I early discovered that once the teapot came out, the conversation deepened: I would hear about struggles - past and present - losses suffered, and troubling faith questions. When we gather, whether it is for tea and cookies, a soup lunch or a pancake supper, we get to know each other, and find out - wonder of wonders - that beneath the superficial differences, we human beings have a great deal in common.

Stories, fellowship and breaking bread create community. The last ingredient mentioned by the author of Acts is prayer. We are used to joining in prayer during worship, with one person leading and the rest responding aloud or in silence. The words and images may lift our hearts, and lead us into a sense of God's presence. When I went on a silent retreat, I wondered why we were bothering to gather for prayer when no one could speak. I learned that just having others around me, all engaged in prayer is powerful. Just being in a place where people have prayed for generations can quiet anxious minds, comfort hurting hearts and help us to rest in God. So we may be finding it hard in this time of COVID-19 not to be able to come to church (to this sanctuary I have grown to love), to gather in one place for prayer. We may discover that we can still join together in prayer even when we are physically separated, even when our church is closed. We may choose to follow the prayers in the Sunday leaflet or simply think of the people who normally sit around us, and then name them one by one, and hold them in

the warmth of God's love. As we visualize each individual, we may engage in a loving kindness meditation, offering this prayer: "may they be blessed, may they be free from pain and suffering, may they experience love and joy." We may reach out beyond the congregation, beyond our family, to think of other people in our community, our nation, our world, we would like to hold in prayer. As we pray for one another, we may feel ourselves being drawn into an ever expanding community where it is indeed "one for all".

Thanks be to God whose steadfast, unconditional love moves us to respond by receiving and sharing with open hands "the gifts of God's creation, that all may have abundant life in every earthly nation". Amen.