

Winfield United Church Reflection - May 10, 2020

“Living Stones”

1 Peter 2: 4-6 <https://youtu.be/twFbweJfUUo>

Eleanor Rigby... this Beatles classic from the mid 1960s surfaced for me this week. What I find fascinating about Eleanor Rigby is the how the context of more than 55 plus years ago is not all that different from today. McCartney's masterpiece arrived at the time seen as countercultural and so very unlike other songs written by the Beatles. The 1960s were a time for a generation's coming of age. Free love, lots of parties, rock and roll ruled the day. But Eleanor Rigby speaks to something noticeably different and is viewed by critics as a social commentary on post war Britain. So what do we find? Empty churches and lonely people. The question without an answer hangs in the air of the haunting lyrics... all the lonely people... where do they all come from?

I find it interesting that the societal phenomenon of being alone in a crowd is still a theme that resonates with us today, some half a century after the Beatles made their assessment. Eleanor Rigby, is the caretaker of the local church. One of her duties is to host the wedding party on their big day and ensure everything is in order. When the nuptials have been exchanged, the pictures snapped, it's her job to pick up the rice after all the guests have come and gone... Then we are introduced to Father McKenzie, the local vicar. It's his job to write words to sermons that no one will hear because no one comes near. Eleanor dies alone and the vicar buries her with her name, the tragedy of these two figures. The Church is empty yet crowds of lonely people wander the streets. The irony is not to be dismissed.

And here we are in 2020. In this time of COVID 19, our churches stand empty, at a standstill. And the Eleanor Rigby's haunt the place. It is a

countercultural picture for me. Yet I am finding a new normal in this time of Sunday services going online. It is becoming familiar to me. But I can't say that I like this reality at all. The hardest thing is to come into the empty sanctuary... in a space that once was filled with voices and laughter and conversation and singing I now find a heavy silence and ask what is it saying... it gives me pause to consider sacred spaces. When I was in my final year of my Master of Divinity program at AST, we were required to undertake a qualitative research project. My topic was an examination of theologies of place and how church buildings contributed to a faith community's understanding of its mission. By way of a brief summary, a church building sustains an individual as well as collective community memory. We know in 2020 the importance of being a missional church, one that takes its values out beyond its walls and into the community it finds itself part of. But my research indicated that the built environment reflects a divine presence that is an integral part of the congregation's work. And memories are attached to a place that contribute to an individual and collective identity.

We are in the season of Easter, which is a time set aside to look at what was taking shape following the crucifixion of Jesus and how the apostles were getting themselves organized and the danger that work meant for them. They were empowered to do a new thing, to share a new way of living and being, to carry on the work Jesus had left to them. Last week, you may recall we read about the priorities of the early church. They gathered in houses, they looked after the poor and widowed, they shared everything they had for the betterment of their community. This week, we read of Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, speak of living stones. Peter is challenging the former practices around the temple as the center for worship. Because of Jesus, the message he shared that God's love is for all regardless of who you are or where you've been. You don't need any special training or qualifications to access that love. Jesus, says Peter, is like a foundation that we build upon this message. Jesus is like the cornerstone, the starting place of the structure. Peter wanted the early followers of the Way, those who would become the church, to

think of themselves as living stones. They don't need to have a temple as the centre of worship that they never had any hope of accessing. NO longer are they cut off from the holy, the sacred. The presence of God was within them, Peter reminds. They are God's dwelling place. Together they create a community that celebrates the God presence and animates their work. The church becomes the building that is made together.

The question I want to leave you with is this...Is the Church still counter-cultural? Do we still frame our mission around ideas that go against societal norms? Or have we become comfortable in buildings and structures and our place on the landscape we find ourselves? Or maybe in the 2020s we need to find a balancing between the two. Where will living stones be found?

Amen and Amen