

Winfield United Church Reflection - May 17, 2020

“Enough”

Acts 17:22-31

Over the past two months, I feel like I approach Sunday's message through the lens of COVID 19. I thankfully have not contracted the virus nor known anyone personally who has; yet every aspect of my work and my living, COVID 19 seems to touch. This Sunday is yet again, no exception.

This past week, I found some sad news in my Twitter feed, announcing that Army and Navy Departments stores would be closing for good, all because of the COVID shutdown. Only five locations remained in western Canada. I certainly do remember that store, having rarely visited Regina as a child without going downtown to the Army and Navy. I discovered that Regina was the second location after the first store opened in Vancouver in 1919, initially as a military surplus and then discount department store. Some of you here this morning might recall this retail chain. The news source cited insurmountable economic challenges resulting from store closures in light of COVID 19 and a stockpile of merchandise with nowhere to go. 101 years is a long time. Not only has an iconic storefront been lost; it's a piece of a community's history and cultural fabric that is suddenly gone.

The retail landscape I suspect is going to look very different in the coming months. Army and Navy won't be the only retailer to close its doors; others will file for bankruptcy protection. Our consuming habits the past two months have changed. In addition to different shopping patterns, there has been this phenomenon of cleaning out one's closets and cupboards of long-forgotten treasures and memorabilia we maybe didn't even remember keeping. When we take care of the clutter in our lives, we are able to make space for more peace and harmony within ourselves, and our families. Perhaps COVID gave us the gift of time to address this. Clutter can lead to stress and anxiety when you can't find important items, or you feel the judgment of others over your untidy abode. This message this morning is not going to provide you with the magic solution to dealing with your stuff, those important keepsakes

and long-forgotten items, but there is lots of help available and de-cluttering has become it's own category of self-help and improvement.

Today, as we continue to read of the activities of the early church, the community that was taking shape following Jesus' death and resurrection, we travel with Paul to Athens. Now Paul as you may recall went from being a persecutor of early Christians to an enthusiastic convert to the Way of Jesus. But his evangelism leaves much to be desired and he has pretty much been kicked out of every community he has visited. After some difficult speaking engagements, Paul finds himself in Athens. And as he is walking about the city square, he notices the Greek polytheistic practice of idol worship. If you had a need, you sought an idol to venerate. And this was big business in Athens. Craftspeople staked their livelihood on the idols they created for worshippers. Then Paul encounters the altar to the Unknown God. There is no record in Greek mythology of such a deity, but it is believed the unknown god was like a catch-all, it covered all the religious bases, just in case a need arose for which they had no god. Paul addresses their idol worship directly and informs them that he knows who the Unknown God is and proceeds to tell them a brief biblical history and how God is the Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer of life. Paul shares his views that God has no need of a shrine built by human hands, for God has no need that humans are required to satisfy.

Part of me takes issue with Paul's message. It's hard to swallow his statements that God doesn't need the work of our hands. We all know that churches do not run on fresh air...or at least they haven't so far. We are still here because we work hard, the Thrift Store volunteers who dedicate countless hours to serving the community, our continued stewardship despite economic uncertainty. Our work has been put on a virtual hold it seems. But we are still here, gathering for this service from our homes, we are still being community. And as I mentioned in the newsletter Friday, we will celebrate Holy Communion through our Zoom service the Sunday after next. I am reminded that, For in God we live and move and have our being...God is as close as our very breath, the ground of our being and not found in the gold or silver of statues. There is no place God is not.

I brought my "idols" with me this morning...

my Connor McDavid jersey...
my Starbucks cup...
my iPhone...
my lovely pens...

Some of my idols have definitely waned since COVID arrived....there's no hockey, no baseball, no sports to watch... Starbucks has closed locally for the time being and it means driving to find a store open and get my fix....my pens, my iPhone....well they are just things. But they are things that bring me joy so I don't separate God from the experience of my favorite things. In this time of closure and being cut off from physical contact due to COVID, I think the virus has shown me the Spirit's presence at work in so many ways I may have never considered, from a ministry standpoint and in my personal life. What are your idols? How has COVID changed your relationship with them?

Our landscape is going to change because of COVID 19. Mere weeks ago, we were concerned and worried about contracting and spreading the virus. Now we fear the impact the shutdown has had on our economy. We hear of massive layoffs in the airline industry, we wonder about the experiences we used to know, the things we used to consume without a moment's hesitation. Health and wellbeing and social connection, I hope, will be the commodities we cherish and cannot bare to part with. As I read Paul's message through the lens of COVID, may we take time to consider our choices going forward and how those things we consume and collect reflect our values, our stewardship, and our faith. We will adapt. We will change. We will find something to call normal again.

Amen and Amen