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What to wear during a pandemic - by George Lavery  
2020904/04

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. (Colossians 3, v.12)

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3, v.14)

I created this simple graphic in an attempt to visually illustrate the connection between the various garments of Christian Grace. They are all inter-connected parts of the one circle and bound together by the central core. Red seemed like the appropriate colour to express the primary emotion at the very heart of this circle of loving care. Outer clothing is often an expression of our inner spirit. This is the inner clothing that finds outer expression in our relationships with others. What this letter to the Colossians is suggesting is that these garments are essential for those who strive to be followers of Jesus.

In any community of faith there are people with different personalities, characteristics, viewpoints, beliefs, hopes and expectations. They may come from different backgrounds and cultures; they will have different life experiences, and priorities, and preferred ways of solving problems. Some will be older and some will be younger, some will have young families, some will be retired; some will be married, others will be single, and some will be widowed. There are a host of differences between the individuals who make up a congregation. What draws them together in a Christian congregation may be different too. It could be the desire to explore the mysteries of the spiritual life, to learn about the way of Jesus, and perhaps to become his followers; it may be to find meaning and purpose in their life, or to find some solace in dealing with the losses and griefs they have experienced, or it may be to be with friends and neighbours, to meet new people, etc., etc. It is significant that the virtues mentioned in this letter to the Colossians, viz. compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and especially love are all related to human relationships. Christianity is lived out in community with all its strengths and limitations, its joys and sorrows, its successes and failures. The task is learning how to live in relation to each other and with God. These virtues are key to fostering a healthy and productive Christian community that will honour the One who came to bring us Good News.

Compassion is the first essential item of clothing mentioned in this letter to the Colossians. The dictionary defines this significant virtue in this way: 'the sympathetic consciousness of others' distress, together with a desire to alleviate it.' This was a distinguishing characteristic in the life of Jesus himself, and an important part of his teaching. [e.g. Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24)] In 2008, Karen Armstrong, a highly respected religious scholar, was awarded a TED prize for her groundbreaking work in the study of various world religions and the ways they interconnect. Her one wish was to get help for creating, launching, and propagating a "Charter for Compassion", to be crafted by a group of leading inspirational thinkers from the three Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and based on the fundamental principles of universal justice and respect. This vision grew from contributions of more than 150,000 people from

180 countries, and was crafted into a succinct, 312-word pledge that allows room for all faiths. The opening paragraph of the Charter states: "The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion compels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect." This has become a worldwide movement offering training and courses to enable people to become more compassionate. The Dalai Lama made this pertinent observation, "Compassion and love are not mere luxuries...They are fundamental to the continued survival of our species."

Kindness is the next item of essential clothing. Goodness by itself can sometimes appear to be quite harsh and stern, but the Greek word used here means the goodness that is gentle and kindly. It is the word used when Jesus said, "My yoke is easy" (Matt. 11:30) meaning the goodness that is comfortable, kindly, not pressing. It is the virtue of the person whose neighbour's good is as dear as one's own. Kindness expresses itself in our relationship with others in what we do, how we do it and when we do it. If we become aware that our particular approach to someone seems to trigger a very negative reaction, then perhaps we need to re-examine how best we can communicate a kindly word or deed that will meaningfully and constructively speak to that person's situation. Timing is also an important consideration here. Near the end of Jesus' life, he said to his disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now." (John 16:12) Because of his loving-kindness, Jesus did not want to overload them and 'blow their circuits'. Later, the Spirit would teach and guide them on the path ahead. The virtue of kindness is widely esteemed by people from other faith traditions.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, now living as a refugee in India, gave us these insightful quotes: "My religion is very simple. My religion is kindness. Be kind whenever it is possible. It is always possible. If we remember that others too are human beings like us, we can extend a sense of kindness even toward those we think of as enemies. The more you nurture a feeling of kindness, the happier and calmer you will be. When we feel love and kindness toward others, it not only makes others feel loved and cared for, but it helps us also to develop inner happiness and peace. Kindness and a good heart are the foundation for success in this life, progress on the spiritual path, and the fulfillment of our aspirations."

During this worldwide pandemic of COVID-19 there are all kinds of stories of people doing thoughtful, caring and kindly things to help friends, neighbours, and even strangers.

Humility is an important item of essential clothing, but it seems like a virtue that is difficult to achieve and even harder to maintain. The word used here means a lowliness or humility of mind and deportment. It suggests a freedom from pride and arrogance. It includes the quality of having a modest view of one's importance; regardless of the role or occupation we may have, we are not the centre of the universe, but only one valuable star in the whirling galaxy around us. From an early age, we learn a way of life through our families, culture, religion, education, vocation, and other life experiences. We may develop a sense of

ownership and even pride in what we have learned. In fact, we may be tempted to assume that our way of understanding and living our life is superior to that of others. All kinds of wars have been fought over racial, social, cultural, political and religious differences. I think Mac Davis, the American Country singer/song-writer in the 80s expressed it very well in his satirical song: "Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way." In our endeavor to wear the clothing of humility it is good to remember two things. We, and all living things in this amazing and complex universe are simply creatures given life by the Creator, who nurtures and cares for us all. The steadfast love of God has been there over the eons of time. Our knowledge and understanding will always be limited, but as we learn more about this vast interconnected web of creation, we are filled with awe, and in humility, we give thanks to the Creator. The second thing we need to remember is that all people are created in the image of God, and there is no room for arrogance when we are living among men and women who share the same glorious lineage. We are all called to respect and care for each other and all creation.

Meekness, as it is portrayed in the Bible, is a very significant virtue. However, in modern English usage the word meek is generally regarded as a rather undesirable quality of life. It suggests a mildness and timidity that is rather submissive and weak. Language is always evolving, and the meaning of words may change over time. In the Bible, both in the Hebrew of the Old testament as well as the Greek of the New testament, the concept of meekness is a strong word, and is a very desirable virtue to emulate. Moses, the great leader of the people of Israel, led his people out of bondage and servitude in Egypt through the wilderness on an extended journey that took some forty years to finally reach the Promised Land. He was considered one of the meekest of men. (Numbers 12:3) Yet this quality was not on account of his timidity, but because of his awareness of his own limitations, and his consequent dependence on God. His inner attitude was lived out as 'gentleness' in his relationship with others. The full meaning of meekness in the Christian tradition comes out in its portrayal as a quality in Christ, which Christians are encouraged to follow. In the Gospel of Matthew, we have the familiar saying of Jesus, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Matt. 11:28-29) The word 'gentle' used here is the Greek word for 'meekness', and is the closest one in modern English to its original meaning. If you are weary, and heavy laden with the burdens in life, you hope to find someone who relates to you with gentleness. If you are strong enough, you will be able to be gentle; if you are psychologically mature enough, you will be able to be gentle; if you are wise enough, you will be able to be gentle.

Patience is often defined as the capacity to accept or tolerate delay, problems, or suffering without becoming annoyed or anxious. It describes someone who is long-enduring or long-suffering, the person who has self-control or the ability of restraint. In our modern society we are often encouraged to be impatient: to want things acceptable to us now, to expect uninterrupted progress, and smooth-sailing along the path of life. While that may be desirable, it is not reality. We encounter difficulties and road blocks along the way, and it seems to me that the critical thing is what we do in the midst of those challenges. Helen Keller was an American author and political activist. She is known around the world as a person of courage and determination in the face of overwhelming odds. At the age of two, following a

bout of illness, she lost both her sight and her hearing. Her world became entirely different; but this was not the end but a new beginning. Her parents got a tutor for her and she gradually learned what she could do. She became the first deaf-blind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. She was a woman of high ambition and great accomplishment who devoted her life to helping others. She offered this observation: "We could never learn to be brave and patient, if there were only joy in the world."

The current world pandemic of COVID-19 has turned everything upside down. Schools, public parks, social gatherings, church services, and all non-essential businesses have been required to close down regular operations. This novel virus is spreading rapidly around the world, and great efforts are being made by governments, public health agencies, and health-care workers to contain this virus and to help the people who have become ill or in danger of death. This is a time of exceptional challenge for everyone. As we do our best to provide the services and research needed to combat this virus, each of us has a vital part to play during this crisis. In the midst of our efforts to be compassionate, kind, humble, and gentle, we need also to put on the apparel of patience. With God helping all of us, we will get through this very tough period, but it won't happen overnight. Restoring peoples' lives, their health and well-being, their schooling, their businesses, and the economy itself will take time. But perhaps this could be the time when we re-examine our priorities as families, as a church, as a society, as a global community. Is there a better way to live together, and to express our caring and sharing with each other?

Love. Finally, there is the appeal to "clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." As William Barclay has shared in his study of Colossians, love is the perfect binding power to hold the whole Christian community together. There is a tendency of any body of people, sooner or later, to fly apart; love is the one bond which will hold them together in unbreakable fellowship. It is the mantle which covers and really incorporates all the other items of clothing; each of them is a fragment of the clothing of love. When one of the professional teachers of the law once asked Jesus about what he thought was the first commandment of all, Jesus' reply was essentially this; 'Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and with all your strength.' And the second was 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' (Mark 12:28-31) For Jesus, all the law and prophets of the Jewish tradition were founded on these two principles of love. It was the central virtue at the very heart of a person's manifestation of faith and life.

In the apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, he shared with them his understanding of love as the greatest spiritual gift and way of living your life in relation to others. It is a love inspired by God's love of us in Christ. (1 Cor. 13:1-13) This scripture is sometimes referred to as the 'Hymn of Love,' and is often used at wedding ceremonies, where people make vows of love and faithfulness to each other.

Ai Weiwei is a Chinese contemporary artist and activist, who is now living in Britain. In addition to his artwork, he has often offered a critical social commentary that has been provocative. I appreciated his thought-provoking article in the Globe and Mail of April 4, 2020, where he shares his perspective on the current coronavirus. He says that there is a virus in the body politic that global societies are passing on to one another: "We have lost our

ability to cherish one another.” He suggests that this critical time affords us an opportunity to view the world with a bit more wisdom.

When we deal with an unanticipated and devastating crisis involving the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19, we need many things – medical equipment, supplies, hospitals, health-care workers, researchers, and all of us in every country and community doing what we can to prevent the spread of this dreaded disease, and to find a way to eliminate it’s harmful effects.

In this letter to the Colossians, we have what is suggested as the essential clothing for followers of Jesus. Or a more facetious way of describing it might be ‘What to wear during a pandemic.’

#### Prayer

Gracious, loving and compassionate God help us to have the courage, strength and faith needed to meet every situation in life with the compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and above all, the love that is needed, so that your loving purposes for this planet come closer to fruition. Amen.

(excerpt from upcoming publication by The Rev. George Lavery)

The robins are back - by Florence Niven  
2020/04/15

The robins are back. They've built a spectacularly messy nest on top of the light by our front door, obscuring the warm glow of our shaker-style lantern with long tendrils of garden debris - once the protective layer around last year's perennials, now a tattered veil.

Our feathered friends are not happy with us. They flap their wings in alarm when we venture outside, scold us with loud staccato chirps, 'Step away! Step away!' Even on our own front step we're reminded of boundaries. Respecting the rules of social distancing, we choose an alternate exit. Finding, as we've had to during this pandemic, different ways of doing things.

It's interesting that this time of global isolation began during Lent, the season Christians traditionally find themselves contemplating a metaphorical wilderness. Waiting for the last exhausting exclamations of winter to subside. Watching for the many gifts of rebirth and renewal spring has to offer. Except this year, the celebration has been delayed. The light obscured by a tattered veil. We must be patient. Mindful.

We stay home for the well being of our communities, especially those most vulnerable, and pray our politicians make wise decisions on our behalf. We stay home for the nurses and doctors so they can better manage the overwhelming task before them. We stay home for the essential workers making sure our cities, towns and villages function during and after this crisis.

Adapting to our new normal, we reach out to one another through the wonders of technology - frequent phone calls, virtual chats. We hold office meetings from the safety of home quarantine. Seek online educational assistance for children - and parents trying to teach. Support food banks and Red Cross workers with paperless e-transfers and fervent prayers.

We stream yoga, art and music classes to move and be moved. We hold family game nights, inviting cross-country participation, to remind us how it feels to laugh, to be with one another.

In doing so we pick up the ties broken by the virus and weave them into new connections. Trusting, anticipating, knowing, the restrictive mandates will eventually be lifted. Through it all we stand firm in our belief that we are not alone. We live in God's world. We seek out signs of hope in the wakening gardens and morning birdcalls. The unfurling of tender leaves, the burst of magnolia and cherry blossoms.

In time we will ease back into our communities and social groups. Cautiously, optimistically, picking up the natural rhythms of our lives. We can never go back, of course; our paths are forever changed. But we can move forward having learned from this experience, grown from this challenge. We will mourn our losses. Laud our heroes. Be stronger for having endured.

The robins are back. There's hope. The light is partially obscured just now, but make no mistake. It's still there. - Florence Niven

All that glitters — by Florence Niven  
2020/05/02

It was a December morning, back when groups still gathered. Before social distancing was a thing. I lay on my yoga mat in the little country church, contemplating the small bedazzled stiletto hanging above the baby Jesus.

Huh.

I'm pretty sure that wasn't what guided the Magi in the well-loved story, but there it was, dangling incongruously above the rustic crèche. Little wooden figures, representing all the key players, were positioned around the baby. And twinkling above the manger, a three-inch replica of a high-heeled pump; resplendent in gold glitter.

It's interesting what you can find in church basements. Small items, like Christmas decorations that don't quite fit a specific theme. Scraps of wallpaper, pinecones, and pipe cleaners collected and ready for Sunday School. Casserole dishes long forgotten by the original owners. Large items also: mismatched couches, floor lamps that lean ever so slightly to one side, end tables with one leg shorter than the other three.

Church basements are the repository for all sorts of interesting things. Like the furniture, untouched for years, with the distinctive 80's vibe. From the one room in someone's home that, despite the label 'living room', rarely witnessed any actual living. Pieces simply too good to throw out. The church basement seems, to many, the perfect retirement destination for such pieces.

We are blessed to receive these items of course, church budgets being what they are. Most are welcomed and put to good use. A little paint here, a slipcover there. Church people are renowned for refreshing, reupholstering, and rewiring. Recognizing possibilities. It's what we do. We can find the perfect spot for just about everything. Including apparently, a bedazzled stiletto.

For everything else, there's the Property Committee's annual yard sale. For \$5 in the early 90's, I bought an actual Kingston traffic light, circa 1972. It was just sitting in the church basement, waiting for me. You would not be the first person to wonder why I would want such a thing. But at the time, I knew a certain little boy, waiting for me at home, would be overjoyed with my purchase.

Perhaps that's one of the greatest gifts we offer to one another – the ability to see value - not only in the things, but also in the people who enter our sacred space. When we open our doors, we're not saying "only the bright and sparkly are welcome." We welcome all. And for those unable to step across the threshold, we reach out — meeting them, where they are in that moment.

At our best, we grieve with those carrying the anxiety of a recent diagnosis, or coping with loss. We rejoice in the news of recovery and reconciliation. Celebrate new babies and children and fresh perspectives. Open the door to the homesick, and heartsick and lonely.

This is where all who are burdened and heavy laden are offered rest. Where we have the opportunity to lay down our mantles of pretence and simply be. Trusting that those around us have the grace to accept us as we are. This is where love is. Where we recognize love is love.

Temporarily unable to gather in community because of this new normal, we seek familiar faces through technology. The growing number of people connecting through virtual Sunday morning services reminds us that the church is more than bricks and mortar. The church is its people.

We know there is much work ahead. Eventually we'll have to face the aftermath of this pandemic, the terrible human cost, the economic repercussions. But for now, we stay home. With empty calendars, our lives move at a slower pace. We take walks in the middle of the afternoon to break up the monotony of the four walls. From a distance we say hello to strangers who pass by, and are no longer surprised when they return our greeting with a ready smile. We are kinder because of this crisis. We know we're in this together.

No longer blinded by all that glitters, we are able to see clearly – the baby, lying in the manger.

You Can Do It - by George Lavery  
2020/05/16

Hebrews 12:1-2a

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...”

Terry Fox was a Canadian athlete, humanitarian, and cancer research activist. In 1980, with one leg having been amputated due to cancer, he embarked upon his Marathon of Hope, an east to west cross-Canada run to raise money for cancer research. He hoped to raise one dollar from each of Canada's then 24 million people. He began in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador in April, and ran the equivalent of a full marathon every day. He was forced to end his run in September near Thunder Bay, Ontario, when his cancer spread to his lungs, after completing 143 days and 5,373 Km. His hopes of overcoming the disease and completing his marathon ended when he died a few months later at the young age of 22. However, his life became an inspiration to countless others, and has resulted in a lasting worldwide legacy. The annual Terry Fox Run, first held in 1981, has grown to involve millions of participants in over 60 countries, and has raised over \$750 million dollars for cancer research., which far exceeds Terry's original hopes.

Our scriptural focus here in this letter to Jewish Christians living in the first century AD, is one of the great moving passages of the New Testament. It reminds us all that in the Christian life we have a goal; we are not simply bystanders, observers, tourists, or casual participants. We are pilgrims on a lifetime journey, and our goal as followers of Jesus is to learn from him and, by God's grace, to become more like him. I think this text gives us at least four things to remember on our journey:

Our Spiritual Inheritance

“Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses” calls us to remember all those people who have encouraged or inspired us on our faith journey. In the previous chapter (11) of this letter, the author recounts the examples and inspiration of countless numbers of ancestors in the faith. Here in Canada we think of the many communities of faith across the country that have nurtured the faith in those who have travelled before us, as well as our own faith in our own lifetime, and have encouraged our reaching out to others with Good News, especially to those in great need. We may think of the many people who have planted good seeds in our life that may have germinated over time. It may have been through parents, other relatives, friends, ministers, Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders, classmates, colleagues, speakers, group leaders, or any number of people who may have touched our lives in wholesome ways. Perhaps they have lit candles of hope, love, joy and peace in our life in a special way. There is indeed a “great cloud of witnesses” through which our lives have been enriched. They pass on to us a rich spiritual legacy, hoping that we will embrace and live out this faith in our own day and generation.

## Travelling Light

“Lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely” calls us to remember that there are encumbrances in our lives that may prevent us from being fully engaged in the challenge of our Christian pilgrimage. These could be attitudes, beliefs, habits, or actions that weigh us down so that we are prevented from being at our best. It could be our “besetting sin” that seems to cling so closely to us that throws us off course. The Christian life, it seems to me, includes both the learning of the way of Jesus, and the unlearning or letting go of those unhelpful impediments that handicap our lives. We need to explore the dimensions of both kinds of learning, if we are to be fully engaged in our mission.

## Perseverance

“Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us” calls us to remember a vital component of our pilgrimage. The Greek word here means steadfast endurance. As William Barclay has suggested, it is not some romantic thing which lends us wings to fly over the difficulties and hard places of life. It is a determination, unhurrying and yet undelaying, which goes steadily on and refuses to be deflected. Obstacles do not daunt it and discouragements do not take its hope away. It is the perseverance or steadfast endurance which carries on until in the end it gets there.

Terry Fox is an excellent example of this kind of perseverance. On the night before his initial surgery to remove his right leg in 1977, he read an article by a man who was an amputee who had competed in the New York City Marathon, which inspired him. Terry embarked on a 14-month training program, telling his family that he planned to compete in a marathon himself. In 1979, he entered and completed a 27 Km road race in Prince George. He came in last place, ten minutes behind his closest competitor; but his efforts were met with tears and applause from the other participants. He then revealed his plan to his family of running the length of Canada in hope of increasing cancer awareness and raising funds for cancer research. Not surprisingly, his mother discouraged him, although she later came to support the project. Terry made this statement: “Everybody seems to have given up hope of trying. I haven’t. It isn’t easy and it isn’t supposed to be, but I’m accomplishing something. How many people give up a lot to do something good. I’m sure we would have found a cure for cancer 20 years ago if we had really tried.”

So, in 1980 he began his non-competitive cross-Canada Marathon of Hope, with the hope of helping others through the raising of money for cancer research. He persevered in spite of personal hardship, discomfort and pain, meeting each obstacle as he encountered it. He only stopped in his quest when his medical condition forced him to do so. His life was certainly a testimony to steadfast endurance. He accomplished more than he or anyone else had even imagined. And through his efforts, he inspired many others around the world even to this present day.

## Our Source of Power

“Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” calls us to remember that we are not asked to go it alone. We have the presence of Jesus, who has promised to be with us always. He is both the goal of our journey and our companion along the way; the one whom we go to meet and the one with whom we travel. Our supreme motivation is the life and example of Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who needed the utmost of courage and stamina for his strenuous and challenging ministry of bringing ‘Good News’ to a broken world. Jesus’ motivation seems to have been the joy of doing God’s will. Jesus has pioneered the trail ahead of us, he enables us to follow in his path, and he waits to welcome us when we reach the end. He invites us now to sing our song of faith on the journey that lies before us one day at a time.

### Prayer

Two verses of a hymn written and composed by Les Petites Soeurs de Jésus in 1961, which has become the L’Arche hymn, which celebrates the loving and compassionate work of the L’Arche community among mentally and physically handicapped men and women in many countries around the world.

“Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey,

I’ll tell everybody about you wherever I go:

for our life and our peace and our love is yourself.

Lord Jesus, you shall be my song as I journey.

I fear in the dark and doubt of my journey,

but courage will come with the sound of your steps by my side;

and with all of the family you saved by your love.

We’ll sing to your dawn at the end of our journey.”

Amen and Amen

Rev. George H. Lavery

Minister Emeritus, Edith Rankin Memorial United Church, Kingston, Ontario

From Where I Sit - by Florence Niven  
2020 / 05/22

There was a time when families paid for their church pew. Parents and offspring would wedge themselves neatly, side by side, into their allotted space. Wealthy patrons near the front, working class at the back. People of color, when allowed entrance, relegated to the balcony.

In some churches, pews were equipped with tiny wooden doors, that kept little ones from wandering; held elders upright should they doze. There was a place for every family and every family had its place.

No longer tethered to a family pew, the invitation these days is to sit where you're most comfortable. But even now, church-goers rarely venture from their usual spot.

It will be interesting to see how this plays out once the mandates of social isolating are eased. I wonder if we'll return to our regular seats, choose to sit at a social distance, or stay away completely - worshipping remotely, from the comfort and security of our homes.

When I was a kid, my family and I attended a United Church in Mt. Pearl, Newfoundland. One of our more colorful parishioners was an elderly gentleman who, for years, sat in the same spot. Heaven help the person who didn't remember this. Each week he would arrive dressed in his finest suit, carrying his accoutrements of Sunday morning worship: hat, cane and seat cushion. His place was eight rows from the front, far right, next to the centre aisle. If the pew was full, he didn't mind. He'd simply squeeze in.

I realized this was a hard and fast reality one Sunday morning when my parents, chatting with friends in the church vestibule, instructed me to go into the church ahead of them and find a seat. A terrifying proposition for a shy 10 year old. I ventured in and sat down. Right on schedule this gentleman shuffled in. Hat and seat cushion in one hand, cane in the other. Held, not for support, rather, as a weapon, which he swung back and forth in an effort to clear his path. I watched in fascination as he inched ever closer to where I was sitting. Too late, I realized I was in his seat. Panic wrapped around me. I envisioned him sitting on me for the duration of the service. Thankfully, my mother swooped in to intervene - gently halting him, and suggesting I choose somewhere else to sit.

I suspect the magnetic pull we feel towards a particular church pew harkens back to the days of assigned seating in schools. Where routine was regulated, independence discouraged. Or perhaps like Goldilocks, after trying a few spots over the years, we settled on the one that was 'just right'.

These days, at church in Kingston, Ontario, my preference is to sit near the front. Sitting at the back of the church doesn't work for me, even though that's where most people congregate. Likely another holdover from school days. The back of the church, like a classroom, considered the safe zone. Far from the minister's gaze, in the event of a post-sermon quiz.

In my case the back of the church offers too many distractions. My mind wanders to the first pair of interesting shoes that walk by, or scarf placed just-so around the shoulders of a friend or acquaintance. To the kids back from university, the babies being jostled in an attempt to sooth, the animated play by play of Wednesday morning's bridge club antics. When I sit at the back, regardless of the lesson from the front, personal intrigue takes precedent over Mark, Luke and John. I'm far more focused at the front, so that's where I sit.

John and Connie joined the congregation in the early 90's. For years, I sat directly behind them. A dear man and his equally dear wife. John reminded me of my dad in looks and temperament. A gentle soul with ready smile, twinkling eyes and quick wit. I wasn't able to see my actual dad as often as I would have liked, as we lived in different parts of the country, but we talked often and the subject of John always came up in conversation. Whenever my parents visited from the east coast we made a point of meeting John and Connie for lunch.

It was natural therefore, that, over time, John and I adopted one another. I looked forward to seeing him and Connie each Sunday morning. Tapping John on the shoulder as I took my seat. "There she is," he would say. Knowing it was me, even before turning around.

In one terrible year Connie, then my dad, then John died. It took a long time for me to go back to church, and when I did I wasn't able to return to my usual seat. Instead, I sat at the back. Beneath a smothering blanket of grief, I was oblivious to the usual distractions. Sitting at the back meant I was close to the exit. An easy escape, when needed – which was often. Usually during a hymn or anthem.

I will weep when you are weeping  
When you laugh, I'll laugh with you  
I will share your joy and sorrow  
Till we've seen this journey through \*

A good friend of mine sits in the choir, facing friends in the congregation she has come to know so well. She witnesses love, and laughter and heartache. Tears are shed regularly by people who find it painful to be present, but can't imagine staying away. This is our family. Our church family. We notice who's there by where they're sitting. We notice who's away by the empty seats.

Or at least we did, before we were told to stay away.

It will take time for people to venture back into the church. We'll have to re-think how we do all of those things we used to take for granted: welcome one another; participate in communion and baptisms; gather for choir practice, and weddings, and funerals; share coffee and conversation. But we'll figure it out. If nothing else, we've learned to be patient during this pandemic.

A mom and her two small children had just started sitting where John and Connie used to sit before we were told to self-isolate. I think John and Connie would be happy with this arrangement. It was time for someone else to claim their spot.

When the mandates are lifted and it's safe to gather once again, we may all feel inclined to choose a new seat. That's ok. It will present us with an opportunity to view things from a new perspective. And that's ok too. At least that's how I see it. From where I sit.

\* Servant Song by Richard Gillard

Fires raged on Pentecost - by Florence Niven  
2020/06/12

Fires raged on Pentecost Sunday. Fanned not by the Spirit, but by the insidious winds of hatred and oppression.

As a white woman, living in a comfortable home, in a predominantly white community, I must tread carefully. I'm standing on holy ground. I have not earned the right to be here. This is the time for other, far wiser voices, to speak their truth.

With his final breath, George Floyd called to his mother. And what followed was a universal keening – from mothers, and those who mother. From sisters and aunties and grandmothers. A deep, resounding, global, anguish that cut to the core. We cry out with our black sisters. Drop to our knees beneath the cross. Oh God. Oh God...

Another senseless killing of an unarmed black human being.

Someone's son. A child of God.

Mothers shouldn't have to say goodnight to their children with bedtime stories of what to do if confronted by a police officer.

Mothers shouldn't have to worry about whether their child will make it home safely after buying Skittles at the corner store. Or after a nightly jog. Or an afternoon of birdwatching.

Mothers shouldn't have to worry that their child will be shot - repeatedly - in their own bed, in the middle of the night, by police officers hiding behind a 'no-knock' warrant.

Now I lay me down to sleep.

I pray the Lord my soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake...

No mother, no father, no loved one should have to experience this kind of pain.

There have been too many deaths. Too many sons and daughters murdered. Too many names forgotten - as names of other murdered sons and daughters take their place. Too many names never heard.

As a white woman, living in a comfortable home, in a predominantly white community, I must tread carefully. I'm standing on holy ground. I have not earned the right to be here. This is the time for other, far wiser voices, to speak their truth. To name their reality. To guide the way.

I'm thankful for their counsel, and their amazing grace. I'm listening.

Overcoming Giants - by Rev. George Lavery  
2020/08/30

1 Samuel 17

“David said to Saul, “Let no one’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.” (17:32)

“David said, “The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.” (17:37)

David and Goliath mural on Goliathhaus in Regensburg, Germany; originally painted by Melchior Bocksberger in 1573.

One of the fascinating sites in the Bavarian city of Regensburg in Germany is this large mural of David and Goliath painted on the wall of Goliath House, which is in the historic centre of the Old Town. The David and Goliath story in the 17th chapter of Samuel is one of the most popular stories from Scripture. It suggests an underdog situation, a contest where a smaller, weaker opponent faces a much bigger, stronger and more frightening adversary. David and Goliath confront each other: Goliath, the powerful giant (about 10 feet tall) with his armour, javelin and sword, and David, the young man with his shepherd’s bag with 5 stones and his sling in hand, along with his faith and trust in God. What seemed to be a weaker, outmatched shepherd defeats a mighty and menacing warrior. It is a lesson of courage, faith, and overcoming what seems impossible.

It reminds me that in our journey through life we all encounter giants of various kinds which threaten or undermine the well-being of our lives. Some of these giants are very personal and can be very intimidating. Some may threaten our family or our community, or our ethnic or cultural rights and traditions. Some giants may threaten our nation or other nations; and some may be a threat to the health of our planet. There are many different kinds of giants that may confront us, one way or another. What are some of these giants and how can we learn the art of battling and overcoming these obstacles to enjoying the fulness of life that God intends for us all?

If you or someone in your circle of care has experienced some form of personal abuse, exploitation, or other traumatic experiences in your life, you may end up having to confront personal giants that threaten your life and well-being. These experiences can have a major impact on your life; in fact, they might even begin to define your future life. These are very hard giants to cope with, and the healing process may involve professional counselling on the road to recovery.

There are other significant giants that we may encounter in life, which may be somewhat hidden to some of us, but others will be painfully aware of their detrimental presence in their lives. My main focus in this meditation will be on one of these broader societal giants that threaten our well-being in our everyday relationships, in our community, and in our nation. One of the most pervasive and devastating giants we regularly encounter as humans

is what I would refer to as cultural captivity. Culture involves the beliefs, values, customs, and traditions of a society. Culture is the lens through which we evaluate everything around us, which gives us the sense of what is proper or improper, normal or abnormal. We learn and absorb culture from our very earliest childhood days and throughout our life. We develop a sense of cultural identity, a feeling of belonging; it becomes part of our self-perception. It is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, locality, and other factors connected to our distinct culture. Cultural captivity may occur when we encounter people from a culture different than our own, and we ignore, discount or fail to respect their culture.

The world that God made is full of marvelous, elaborate and complex diversity. The whole created order is a testimony to its beauty and mystery. The story of humanity is one of rich diversity and possibility. What is required is learning how to live respectfully, productively and joyously in the midst of cultural diversity. But the reality of history indicates that we humans have found it very difficult to do that. We become trapped in our cultural captivity, and are often quite oblivious that we are doing it, or feel powerless to do anything significant about it.

Cultural captivity is certainly a Canadian problem, and I'll have more to say about that shortly.

But I want to make clear that this problem is not confined to any one country; it is indeed a global problem. I have had the opportunity to travel fairly widely and have worked with many people from different countries, cultures, races, and ethnicities. Whether it is Africans, Asians, Caribbeans, Latin Americans, Europeans, Russians, etc. I have heard many stories of tribalism, discrimination, ethnic cleansing, and racism, all of which are different forms of a cultural captivity that dehumanizes people and causes immeasurable suffering. One of my continual observations is that ethnic minorities often face very major challenges and obstacles in the country in which they are living, where they are not the dominant culture.

Let us now focus on Canada, a country which often prides itself on being multicultural and welcoming diversity. Certainly, the people who live here come from every corner of the globe.

Over many years we have made some important progress in becoming a more just, equitable and inclusive society; but we are still faced with some very troubling and persisting problems that have been part of our lived reality for a very long time. They particularly relate to the treatment of our ethnic minorities, including Indigenous peoples and Blacks, and other racialized groups. If you really want to know the realities of our situation, you ask the people most affected, and hopefully they will share their experiences with you. We need to LISTEN.

Michaëlle Jean, a former Governor General of Canada (a Haitian refugee raised in Quebec), had some very pertinent things to say in response to the many recent demonstrations made asserting "Black Lives Matter". She said, "Racism makes life a constant struggle for Black Canadians. Of all the scourges afflicting humanity, the most devastating and recurrent is racism." She said it is systemic, which includes demeaning behaviours, prejudices, attitudes, slurs and jibes, harassment, ethnic profiling, insinuations, putdowns, and exclusion due to

ethnic origin, colour of their skin. Her experience is that racism is a succession of painful stings, never trivial, never harmless; it may be unwitting, and it exists in every society.

Our Prime Minister of Canada, Justin Trudeau, made this acknowledgement: "There is a systemic discrimination in Canada, which means our systems treat Canadians of colour; Canadians who are racialized, differently than they do others."

Perry Bellegarde, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, made this comment about how Canadian police officers interact with people of different ethnicities: 'First Nations face systemic racism in every aspect of life, and from every institution of Canadian society. Canada's unwillingness to address systemic racism is killing people.'

Jody Wilson-Raybould, a former Minister of Justice in the Federal Government and Attorney General of Canada, now an independent Member of Parliament, an Indigenous person from the west coast, had a number of observations to make. "I pushed for bold criminal justice reform. Nothing happened. Too often, political expediency triumphed over bold and necessary action." "The relationship of Indigenous people to our justice system, including policing, is one of the starkest examples of systemic racism, and how the legacy of colonialism remains with us." Today, she says we need leaders who have the will, understanding, and courage to make the necessary foundational transformational changes, including new laws, policies and practices to address the harmful realities.

Murray Sinclair, is a member of the Canadian Senate, a First Nations lawyer, who later served as a judge in Manitoba, and who served as Chairman of the Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation Commission from 2009 to 2015. At the release of the final report of the commission in 2015, with its 94 Calls to Action, Sinclair made these comments: "A period of change is beginning, that if sustained by the will of the people, will forever realign the shared history of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in Canada. Change, of course, will not be immediate. It will take years, perhaps generations."

In the various discussions that have taken place recently in order to understand the realities of the challenges we face, leaders have wondered or argued about the meaning of "systemic racism." In contributing to the current discussion, Senator Murray Sinclair indicated that people are wrong to interpret systemic racism as a statement that everyone is racist in a given system. "Systemic racism is when the system itself is based upon and founded upon racist beliefs and philosophies and thinking and has put in place policies and practices that literally force even the non-racists to act in a racist way."

The threatening and harmful realities of cultural captivity show up in many different ways. What conditions have to exist in a society that would motivate an extremist to walk into a Mosque in Quebec City in 2017 and murder 6 people and wound others, while they were at worship? What conditions have to exist in a society to encourage "zoom bombing" several Toronto synagogues with hateful messages, whose congregants were engaged in online prayer services during this pandemic? What conditions have to exist in a society that Canadians who identify as being of Chinese ethnicity in Vancouver are being subject to threats, intimidation, or other forms of harassment?

The Apology to First Nations Peoples of The United Church of Canada, delivered by Moderator Bob Smith in Sudbury in 1986, indicates its understanding of cultural captivity.

“Long before my people journeyed to this land your people were here, and you received from your Elders an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich, and to be treasured.

We did not hear you when you shared your vision. In our zeal to tell you of the good news of Jesus Christ we were closed to the value of your spirituality.

We confused Western ways and culture with the depth and breadth and length and height of the gospel of Christ.

We imposed our civilization as a condition of accepting the gospel.

We tried to make you be like us and in so doing we helped to destroy the vision that made you what you were. As a result, you, and we, are poorer and the image of the Creator in us is twisted, blurred, and we are not what we are meant by God to be.

We ask you to forgive us and to walk together with us in the Spirit of Christ so that our peoples may be blessed and God’s creation healed.”

It seems to me that the Scriptural record clearly indicates that the Good News of Jesus Christ is intended to be available to all people. After his resurrection, Jesus came to his disciples (learners of the Way) and said to them: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

What appeared to start out as a Jewish sect, became a global religion. It spread far and wide. The message of the Gospel is that God so loved the world – the whole world and everybody and every living organism within it. There are many stories and instances where Jesus indicates that his life perspective was not confined to his own particular Jewish culture (e.g. Good Samaritan, Woman at the well, the healing of people on the Sabbath, conversations with women in public, speaking with outcast and troubled people, and even accepting the hospitality of a tax-collector. He often broke through norms and customs of his own culture in order to help, heal, guide and support those who needed his care.

The critical question is ‘How do we live the Gospel, with its worldwide intentionality, without being trapped by the limitations of our particular culture?’ We have struggled with that issue for many centuries, and no simple answer has emerged. We have often learned by hindsight what we should not do. We have often learned that it is folly to be in a hurry to implement or impose our objectives. Given the diversity of the world and the people who inhabit it, it seems to me that one way we could approach it is through this pattern: Listen, Learn, Love.

We need to listen to what others are saying or not saying to us, and how they are doing that.

We need to learn what gives meaning and richness to the lives of others, and what threatens or discourages them. If we listen and learn with sufficient sensitivity and wisdom, then we can learn to love in a way that brings encouragement, life and hope.

Living the Gospel, with all its dimensions and diversity is a humbling and exciting lifelong adventure for each one of us who want to be learners of the Way of Jesus. We are called to love one another with all our differences and diversities. Perhaps, with God's help, we may even overcome some of the giants we encounter along the way.

Prayer

"Draw the circle wide. Draw it wider still.

Let this be our song, no one stands alone, standing side by side,  
draw the circle wide.

God the still point of the circle, 'round whom all creation turns;  
nothing lost, but held forever, in God's gracious arms.

Let our hearts touch far horizons, so encompass great and small;  
let our loving know no borders, faithful to God's call.

Let the dreams we dream be larger, than we've ever dreamed before;  
let the dream of Christ be in us, open every door.

Amen.

- Words and music by Gordon Light (1994) More Voices # 145

Farewell from Bill Smith  
2020/08/30

Dear Friends at ERMUC

As my time at Edith Rankin Memorial 'officially' comes to a close, I want to write and thank you all for your support, encouragement and love during the past year as I served as one of your supply ministers. So much of ministry went on during this time, from Birth to Death, from Sacrament and Celebrations, and from joyous times along the banks of Collin's Bay to sharing times via RingCentral Meetings. Highlights for me certainly include the opportunity to preach each week and spending times with 'our kids', so full of wisdom and wonder, from six baptisms on one Sunday to 'glow sticks' lighting the sanctuary on Christmas Eve and, of course, getting to know many of you and the gift of your friendship.

It was a privilege to work with the Rev. Joe, my partner in ministry during this time. While we have known one another for years, this was a rare opportunity to share together in ministry. I was deeply appreciative of Joe's computer skills which got us through this COVID-19 pandemic with on-line worship.

As a staff, I believed we modelled what it means to be a team and I am grateful to Barry, Lawrence, Tanya, Shannon, Kim, Rhonda, Elizabeth, Ruth and of course Joe. In a time filled with change, we were able to work together in this ministry. Thank you.

I am delighted that Michelle will now be joining the team with her many gifts of ministry.  
WELCOME MICHELLE !

Finally, I give thanks to God for such a wonderful opportunity to share in the Gospel.

In Faith

Bill

What am I forgetting? by Florence Niven  
2020/09/04

It started a few months ago. I woke suddenly from a deep sleep. Certain I had something important to do, but no idea what it was. My first thought was to wake my husband. Ask him. He's usually good at remembering such things - it seemed an obvious solution. I was about to rest my hand on his shoulder, when, becoming more fully aware of the time - 1:26am, I thought better of it. I decided to go back to sleep, and deal with whatever 'it' was, in the morning.

It happened again last week. I woke with a start. Jumped out of bed. The dog! He'd been waiting all this time to go out. I'd completely forgotten about him. I pictured our beautiful brown and black, (and surprisingly large) dog - waiting for me downstairs. Poor thing. I rushed to the bedroom door, put my hand on the doorknob, and stopped short. "Hold it. Do we have a dog? Yes. I'm pretty sure we have a dog. Wait. Am I dreaming? I might be dreaming. I don't think we have a dog. Do we have a dog?" (We don't have a dog.)

It's anxiety, of course. The constant waiting and wondering when the proverbial 'other shoe' will drop - and on whom. Watching as, each day, the world falls deeper and deeper into despair. Disrepair. My mother describes it as constantly feeling like someone is about to sneak up behind her. With me, it's the feeling I've forgotten something. And all my to-do lists and reminders, don't seem to help.

It's human nature to set goals. Imagine the outcome of our planning - with all the pieces falling neatly into place. But the fluid nature of the pandemic has changed everything. Although we still plan, we plan with the knowledge that situations may, and probably will, change at the last minute.

I wonder what churches will look like moving forward? Will we ever again feel comfortable sitting next to our neighbour? Will we ever be able to relax and enjoy the light streaming through the stained glass windows? Be filled with the ministry of music coming from a full choir? Concentrate on the message, as we socially distance - behind our masks, with our hands carefully sanitized?

Our church, like so many, switched to Sunday morning online services at the beginning of the lockdown. During these services, we are sometimes invited to join virtual 'small group' discussions in an effort to stay connected with one another. One Sunday, our small group was chatting about the various signs of God noticed during the week before.

It threw me. It was the Sunday after George Floyd was killed. The horrifying images that had played out in real time had left me reeling. Feeling untethered. I answered honestly that I hadn't noticed any signs of God in the week that was.

A friend, and Spirit Sister, one of the others in our small group, calmly said my name. She wanted to make sure I heard her words in our strange new cyber-world bubble. With the

reassuring confidence she has accrued over her 93 years, she said, “God was standing with the women. The women who stood with arms linked, between the police and the protestors.”

It was a lifeline.

My friend invited me to step away from the media onslaught, and instead, look to those at the heart of the matter. It was what I needed in that moment.

And so, I did. I looked to the women in the crowd - for their wisdom and guidance. The mothers. Weary from burying their children. Standing together in solidarity. Repeating the names, and demanding justice for black lives lost. Because Black Lives Matter. And I realized, yes, God was there. Standing in the heart of the heartache.

Perhaps that’s what we have to do in this time and space. Lead with faith – instead of fear. Plan, and organize, and anticipate, but also, allow room for contemplation and reflection. Be still. Listen.

Only then, will we be open and receptive to the difficult conversations ahead. Only then, can we support those working toward meaningful change. Only then, can we put our faith into action - reach beyond the quagmire of conflicting reports and endless name-calling; the polarization of pontificators and politicians. Stay grounded in the knowledge we are not alone. That God is at the heart centre.

This realization has afforded me a way to move forward. A certain measure of serenity. I no longer think I was looking for a dog in the middle of the night. I think I got it backwards. I think I was looking for God.

Light and Rainbows - by Carolyn McPhee  
2020/09/21

I have been intrigued and in awe of rainbows and prisms since I was a young child. Many years ago, I hung a single glass prism in the east facing window of our cottage to catch the morning light. Over the years, I have shared my enthusiasm for prisms and rainbows with many of my cottage guests—gently setting the prism in motion on a sunny morning to fill the room with dancing rainbows. Most of my guests thought it was lovely, but it wasn't until I had grandchildren that I truly had a captive audience! My daughter Katie has three little boys—Ben is six and our little twins Jacob and Matthew are three. I was blessed to spend a good part of the summer at the cottage with my daughter and my grandsons. And every sunny morning we all delighted in the beautiful rainbows created by the light passing through our prism. It only took the sunlight and a gentle nudge of the prism to turn our living room into a magical land of brilliant colour. The boys would run around the room chasing the rainbows, their voices filled with delight! Every sunny morning was a new experience—they never seemed to tire of our little ritual. And I never tired of seeing and hearing their joy and wonder—it brought so much light into my life!

We spent Labour Day Weekend at the cottage—one final summer weekend to mark the end of our beautiful summer. Saturday dawned bright and sunny—full of light—a perfect day for the rainbows to dance in our cottage. The boys were delighted. That afternoon, clouds gathered very quickly and we had a very brief, but heavy rainfall. I was out on the screened in porch, when I saw through the trees, a beautiful rainbow appearing over the lake as the rain stopped and the sun came out from the clouds. I called my daughter and the boys and we all ran down to the dock. There before us was one of the most beautiful rainbows that I have ever seen! A perfect arc stretching from one shore to the other. The colours were brilliant and perfect. And as we watched in wonder, a second rainbow formed above the first perfect one. It was truly a magnificent sight! And equally as wondrous as the rainbow, was seeing our little boys—their eyes filled with awe and amazement, their little voices bursting with excitement. My heart was filled to overflowing with love, joy and light.

Light. Contemporary theologian Dorothee Soelle writes “Light illumines the world and we can immerse ourselves in it.” While I was at the cottage I found it so easy to immerse myself in light. Light was all around me in the beauty of God's world and in the love of my family. I felt deep gratitude—and I also felt removed from the stresses and challenges of our world. But these are difficult times—these Covid times. Summer is drawing to a close and the long, often dark winter lies ahead. How do we keep seeking the light and how do we keep our hearts and our minds open to love, joy and wonder?

As Michelle said in a recent sermon, God calls us to clothe ourselves in the armour of light. We belong to the light and we belong to the love. Last week we gathered online as Spirit Sisters. We yearn to be together again in a shared physical space, but we were so very grateful that we could gather virtually and be together in spirit. I could feel the light and the love in our gathering. We all belonged there in the circle of caring.

It will take courage to keep finding light and wonder in our lives. We will all have days when the clouds block the sun and the light can't shine through the prism to create the rainbows. Our little boys were disappointed on cloudy days when the dancing rainbows were not available. But we tried our best to reassure them that we would have another sunny day soon and the rainbows would return. And we will have days when we find that something that brings light into our life doesn't last as long as we wish it would. Just like the beautiful rainbow at the lake—I felt that I could stand there immersed in the wonder of it forever. But too soon the colours started to fade and the arc was no longer complete. The memory of it lives in my heart and I try to have faith that I will see many more beautiful rainbows.

Prayer:

Loving God, guide us with your light through these challenging times. Help us to keep our hearts and minds open to the light, love, joy and wonder that is available to us. May we be grateful for all your blessings of light in our lives. Amen.

Simple Pleasures - by Florence Niven  
2020/10/27

Autocorrect was write. I mean, right.

At the end of summer, a friend emailed to tell me she was busy canning all the fruits and veggies of her labour. I replied, "Sounds like you're heavily ensconced in the work of your garden." Autocorrect jumped in - as autocorrect does - with an unsolicited correction. Changing my comment to 'heavenly' ensconced.

In this case, autocorrect was right.

The tasks of preparing the soil, planting, and watering; gathering and preparing the bounty; labelling mason jars, and organizing the canned produce on pantry shelves, were indeed heavenly for my friend. Offering her countless moments of grace. A reprieve from the stress and uncertainty of the time.

She wasn't alone in this. Once spring beckoned, gardeners of every description were anxious to slough off their quarantined quarters, and get outside to dig in the dirt - enlarging existing gardens, or starting from scratch.

For those of a certain age - for whom the ground was not nearly as handy as it once was - raised beds became the hot new trend. Keeping rabbits, squirrels and chipmunks from stealing 'their' portion of the harvest, an on-going topic of socially distanced, mask to mask discussion.

Interest in houseplants saw a resurgence during this time, also. Photos of lush greenery, accessorized with painted terracotta pots, suspended from macrame hangers, were posted regularly on Facebook and Instagram, by proud first-time plant-parents with time on their hands. Home décor accents reminiscent of a groovier time, for those of us who remember 1972.

This was the year both young and not so young, discovered, or re-discovered, the calm that comes from nurturing plants. As months of isolation crept by, with restrictions on daily activities the norm, we gravitated back to the earth. Our gardens flourished.

My personal piece of heaven during the great spring and summer quarantine of 2020, wasn't actually in the garden, but rather, garden adjacent - high above the backyard perennials, around my honest-to-goodness squirrel-proof bird feeder. Where chickadees, finches and cardinals dropped by daily to partake of the safflower seed offering. The feeder remains in service - attached to the bottom of a series of giant metal S's. Hooked one into another like the child's game, Barrel of Monkeys - dangling from a limb of our big old maple. The last bastion of a battle hard won.

This was not the feeder I started with in April. That one, hyped as 'allowing small birds in, and keeping everything else out', was sheathed in a heavy metal cage, and was guaranteed to

be squirrel proof. I filled it with what I'd heard was the most desirable of seeds – the black shelled sunflower. I hung it proudly from a shepherd's hook, and imagined the many songbirds that would be adding our garden to their flight plan in the coming months. By the time I walked back to the deck, I noticed the first squirrel. Inside the cage. Deliriously happy to have stumbled upon the motherlode.

Those squirrels – so mischievous. I chuckled as I moved the feeder further away from the fence. I realize now, they saw this as a challenge. And no self-respecting squirrel ignores a challenge.

A tug and pull of wills ensued – becoming more intense as the days went by. Annoying, for sure, but having been raised to respect all of God's creatures, I was determined to find an amicable resolution.

Over the next few weeks I moved the feeder further and further from any jumping-off points, only to discover just how far a squirrel was willing to hurl himself into mid-air for the reward of sunflower seeds. I placed baffles above and below the feeder, which they leapt over with aggravating ease. Following the suggestion of a YouTube expert, I added what I thought was an ingenious obstacle - a streamer of green plastic, cut from a pop bottle - that spiralled loosely around the hanger. Surely this wiggly-jiggly contraption would at least give the squirrels pause. My son said it looked like a snake. "Aha!" I thought triumphantly. "That'll keep them away!"

It became quiet in the garden. Too quiet.

Dang. What looked like a snake to the squirrels, must have looked like a snake to the birds, as well. I removed the plastic obstacle.

The demon squirrels, put on earth - I was now convinced - solely to vex me, were emboldened by their victory. When they weren't climbing into the cage, lounging against the metal grid as they ate, they taunted me by hanging from the enclosure and pouring the seeds into their greedy little mouths. Gloating superiority written all over their smug little squirrel faces.

Then one of them got stuck inside. He had eaten one paw-full of seeds too many. I panicked. He panicked. I tried to help but was met with nasty squeaks as I approached – as if the predicament in which he found himself, was somehow my fault. He thrashed this way and that, and eventually made his way out - scrambling along the fence top without a backward glance.

I got rid of the falsely advertised 'squirrel proof' feeder that day - replacing it with one that actually worked. I hung it from the aforementioned suspension bridge of giant metal S hooks. Out of reach of tiny paws. This feeder has a cage that moves up and down, blocking access to the seeds when anything larger than a songbird tries to perch. Upon the advice of a neighbour, I replaced the sunflower seeds with the safflower seeds. To the squirrels, the Brussels sprouts of the outdoor buffet - and of absolutely no interest.

Without the threat of a bushy-tailed 'four-legged' leaping onto the feeder, the birds returned. Gold and purple finches, woodpeckers, sparrows, nuthatches and chickadees are regulars. The ever-elegant Mr. and Mrs. Cardinal arrive together, wait patiently until the others have been served, then dine at dusk.

The squirrels and I have reached an understanding. They are welcome to play in the garden as long as they don't go near the feeder. Since discovering the giant bowl of peanuts in a shell, left for them regularly by our neighbours on the left, and the multitude of riches in the neighbour's massive garden on the right, they seem fine with this arrangement.

Perhaps that's one of the lessons of the lockdown. Whether planting and nurturing seeds, canning the bounty of the harvest, or communing with the creatures whose space we share – a sense of balance can be cultivated. If we're lucky, the feelings of scarcity and limitation, brought on by the restrictions, might even shift - to feelings of abundance and expansiveness. Just by spending time in nature and discovering the myriad of simple pleasures waiting there for us.

Choosing Faith Over Fear - by Florence Niven  
2020/11/02

- Spirit Sisters meditation, October 2020

A few years ago I experienced a painful tingling sensation across the middle of my back. I assumed - because of my extensive television medical knowledge - it was shingles, even though I saw no evidence of a rash. After an examination, my doctor told me that, sometimes, when we're under a great deal of stress - which I was at the time - we forget to breathe. She said I was shallow breathing - in a sense, hyperventilating.

I had let fear take over. I was holding my breath - waiting for the other shoe to drop. The painful tingling was my body's way of telling me it wasn't getting the oxygen it needed.

My doctor sent me home with instructions to breathe.

I decided a change was in order. Since living in fear was doing me no favours, I made a concerted effort to live in faith. To ease up on the delusion of being in control, and lean into being - if not thrilled, then at least ok - with not having all the answers. Being open to what Spirit Sister Tysie Mitchell refers to as the Holy Mystery.

Now I must admit, I'm not as cool as Tysie is about this notion - but I aspire to her grace.

So here's the question of the day - how does one live in faith - not fear - in the middle of an honest-to-goodness pandemic? It's the stuff of science fiction. How in the world did we go from the 'possibility of a 2 week lockdown' - to this?

I've been thinking about the last Sunday morning service at Edith Rankin before we were told to close the doors. There was a noticeable drop in attendance from the Sunday before, as media reports of the virus started to escalate. My husband and I were ushering that morning. The McCrackens were the greeters. From where we were standing, at the back of the sanctuary, Don and I could hear the laughs and giggles coming from the Welcome Centre as people arrived. Marlene and Brian were struggling with the absurdity of suddenly 'bumping elbows' with friends and neighbours they had known for years, rather than greeting them with a warm handshake, as was our tradition. Let's face it. Back then - we didn't know, what we didn't know.

And here we are, preparing for the second wave. Once again stocking up on hand sanitizers, canned goods and bathroom tissue; grabbing our face masks as we leave the house; staying away to stay safe. It's very easy to get caught up in the wondering and second-guessing. Fixate on limitations and restrictions. Allow fear to seep in, climb up your spine and wrap around your shoulders. Or perhaps that's just me.

More and more, we face the very real ramifications of isolation, as we hear of the challenges our friends and family are facing. Knowing our only option is to stay away - support from a distance. It's not something, we as a community of faith, are used to doing.

Add to that - the heightened awareness of systemic racism, the protests that bring out the best in people, for sure - but also the worst - the environmental catastrophes, the economic reality of this pandemic... Holy Mystery? Holy Moly!

I remind myself to breathe. Breathe in faith. Breathe out fear. I try to stay present as a way to stay positive.

My son and his fiancé are planning a February wedding. From day 1 they wanted to keep the ceremony small. Their guest list was capped at 60. Then Covid struck. They started thinking 14 was a more realistic number – with only immediate family present. As we get closer to the date, there's a strong possibility it will be just the two of them and their officiant. And you know what? Whether we're there in person or see their pictures later, it'll be ok. More than ok. The two most important people will be there, and they will be surrounded by love.

We still plan, we still organize, we still anticipate – it's human nature. But if we're wise, we'll ease our grip on the notion of control, and allow space for contemplation and reflection. Breathing room.

On an airplane (remember those?) we are advised to remain calm and adjust our own facemask before helping our loved ones. We can't expect to be of service to others if we don't first ground ourselves in the knowledge that we're not alone. God is with us. Breathe.

When we live in faith we become open to the abundance all around us, hidden behind what fear would have us see as scarcity.

When we live in faith we become open to opportunities, hidden behind what fear would have us see as limitations.

When we live in faith rather than fear we're better able to participate openly, honestly and respectfully in the challenging conversations that are needed in today's climate.

Choosing faith, over fear, reminds us we are surrounded by the Spirit. And from there we can move toward faith-filled action. It starts with our breath.

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Breath Prayer

Breathe in and know God is with us.

Breathe out.

Breathe in and know God is.

Breathe out.

Breathe in and know God.

Breathe out.

Breathe in and know.

Breathe out.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Breathe.

Florence Niven, October 2020

The Advent Token - by Florence Niven  
2020/12/06

It was a simple idea. One my sister, the organist at a United Church in Fredericton, New Brunswick, told me about. The minister had asked the congregation to consider wearing something special for the first Sunday of Advent. A token of some sort. Something to remind them of a loved one they wouldn't be seeing over the holidays. A bracelet or scarf, perhaps. A hand knit sweater, or hockey jersey. It was suggested as a way of holding those nearest and dearest close - at least symbolically - even as they were absent. My sister had chosen to wear a glass brooch I had given her, once upon a time.

I shared the idea with the planning committee of our women's spirituality group in Kingston, Ontario. I thought it might be something we could invite the women to do for our December virtual gathering.

I imagined choosing for my item, my dad's black and grey plaid fleece shirt. I'd brought it back to Ontario after my last visit to New Brunswick. It had been a personal favourite of Dad's. Warm and comfy, it had helped ease the chill of many a long winter's day. The week after he died, my sister wore it. Not because of sentimentality or longing, although that was certainly part of it, but rather because of a nasty fall. My sister had slipped on the icy sidewalk near her house and badly broken her wrist. Her neighbour found her. He called me at our mother's house just down the street, where I was staying.

Hours of waiting in the emergency room, x-rays, then bone fragment manipulation by a skilled orthopaedic surgeon followed. I didn't actually see that last part. Once I heard the doctor's plan, I made my way to the hallway, slumped into a chair, and bent forward to rest my head against my knees. I waited for my world to stop spinning. Tried not to dwell on the fact our father had died in this hospital, just the week before.

My sister was sent home with strict instructions not to move, or put pressure on her injured limb, protected temporarily with layers of thick white bandaging. After discovering nothing in her closet would fit over the bulky appendage, I went down the street to see what I could find of Dad's. As I opened his closet door I whispered softly, "Ok Dad. You have to help here. Just one last time." And then I spotted his plaid fleece. It slipped easily over the dressing, protecting my sister during those first few weeks, as her wrist, and her heart, began to mend.

Midway through telling my story to the planning committee, I could feel my tears starting to well. This seemed like such a lovely idea before I waded into the middle of a memory.

I decided it might be wiser for me to choose a token from a loved one still living - albeit out of reach in this strange new normal. A favourite winter hat my mother knit for me years ago could work. It's the perfect Wedgewood blue and features a wide Celtic braid knitted in the folded brim around my face. It keeps me warm on the coldest of days. I think of my mother when I wear it, and marvel at the skill required to combine the intricate stitches.

I could choose something from my sister like the heavy ceramic necklace she brought me back from Greece when she was a footloose and fancy-free twenty-something, exploring the world. I love the heft of it, the striking ebony color and metal detailing. Each time I wear it I'm reminded of the years when I travelled vicariously - through my sister's photos and stories - during a time when my real-life adventures took place close to home, and involved young children and Play Doh.

I suppose I could wear the hockey jersey hanging in my youngest son's closet. He lives so close - a two-hour drive to Ottawa - yet seems so far away during this pandemic. Actually, I'm not sure I could pull off a hockey jersey. I know so little about the game, beyond the fact it involves a stick. And a puck. And far too much fighting for my liking. For the longest time I kept erroneously naming his favourite team - which mortified him to no end, especially when friends were around. 'Maw-umm.....', he'd say. The dreaded two-syllable address familiar to mothers everywhere.

Our Christmas visit this year will be over Zoom. I wish he could come home to be with his brother, his dad and me, but I must defer that wish to another time.

This Advent exercise has been fun to imagine, but it occurred to me that I don't need a token. I think of my loved ones every day, and count them among my many blessings. I know there are those for whom childhood memories are not happy. I know there are families who, for one reason or another, will remain separated long after this pandemic. I try not to take my blessings for granted, but of course, some times I do. And so I'm thankful for this gentle reminder. To take a minute to think about loved ones, however they are defined for us, even as we maintain our distance.

Such a simple idea. Such a timely idea.

We may not be with our actual families, or our chosen families, over the holidays, but we can always carry them close to our hearts, and remember them fondly. Every day; any day.

With or without a token.

Florence Niven - November, 2020

Meditation on Hope - by Linda Delve  
2020/12/10

[Presented, virtually, to Spirit Sisters, a women's group at Edith Rankin Memorial United Church, on December 9, 2020; Stage directions included]

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A gift! [Show a wrapped package] How wonderful!

I asked Santa for Louise Penny's newest mystery novel. I wonder . . . [look under gift; shake gift; smell gift; feel gift]

I hope I get what I asked for. Am I hoping for too much? Hmmm! Well, whatever it is, I hope it will be something good!

What exactly is hope? When I looked at scripture and researched how hope was used, I found I didn't really understand hope as well as I thought I did. Hope plays a huge role in our Christian faith. Hope is Bold!!

The Psalms alone use the Hebrew words for hope 40 times. But what does hope really mean? Does it mean I tell God about all the things for which I am hoping, and magically these gifts arrive under my Christmas tree. Voila!

Surely, I should not be making my list as if God were the Sears catalogue - (Is there still such a thing?)

One Hebrew word for hope is Yakhel, which means a time of waiting. Yes, that makes perfect sense! During Advent, hope is about expecting something that will happen in the future, in about two weeks time, at least the last time I checked my calendar. In the meantime, we wait!

Oh, in case you hadn't noticed, COVID has all of us waiting for some 'future' that is better than what we are enduring at this moment.

Another Hebrew word for hope is Qavah, which means the tension of anticipation. It has been compared to pulling a piece of yarn to its highest point of tension until it breaks! Tension, tension, tension, then relief in the release! [pull a piece of yarn until it breaks]

We have all watched a child count the sleeps until Christmas! Lots of tension there! Then, the excitement of Christmas morning.

So, continuing with Advent, I am awaiting the birth of baby Jesus! A baby! How wonderful! This is easy for you and me to say! We are not the ones giving birth! You see, hope might not be so simple or so easy, after all. Giving birth can be painful. Full of uncertainty.

The circumstances for mother-Mary didn't look very hopeful. Riding all that way from Nazareth to participate in this inconvenient census, and then going into labour at the worst possible moment, even before they had had time to check into the inn. And who was she, to even think this baby was the Son of God! How could she count on God when He seemed to be getting it all wrong?

The Census! The COVID! Hopeless? Or Hopeful? The Biblical understanding of hope is Bold! Hope is Confident! It isn't about seeing the proof that good things are going to happen. In fact, sometimes there is really no way anything is going to get better.

How can we say there is Hope when things feel Hopeless? Time and again, the prophets in the Bible chose hope anyway. Why? Because of God's promises! Choose HOPE!

The Psalmist says: I am counting on the Lord, yes, I am counting on Him. I have put my hope in His word. Psalm 130: 5 - 7

HOPE is the gateway to something more than we can ever imagine! [Shake gift]

Even you might be surprised! [Shake gift, again, along with a hidden container of beans. Surprise, there will be sound too.]

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Advent Meditation by Florence Niven  
2020/12/20

Beyond the anxiety, beyond the isolation,  
beyond the restrictions –  
to gather,  
to celebrate,  
to grieve...

Hope resides.

Hope lives in the quiet spaces.

In wish-filled longings,  
and fervent prayers.

Between imagination and possibility.

Hope resides,  
because a Child was born.

Beyond broken promises, broken systems,  
broken policies -  
that demoralize,  
dehumanize,  
and demonize...

Peace resides.

Peace lives in the quiet spaces.

Of acknowledgment.  
Respectful action. Significant change.

Between imagination and possibility.

Peace resides,  
because a Child was born.

In places of awe, and unabashed wonder,  
where Hope,  
and Peace flourish -  
untethered; unencumbered,

and authenticity is celebrated...

Joy resides.

Between imagination and possibility.

Joy resides,  
because a Child was born.

Beyond hate-filled rhetoric, abuse of power,  
broad strokes –  
that divide,  
suppress,  
and marginalize...

Love resides.

Love lives in the quiet spaces  
of hard work and heart work.  
Of compassion and commitment,  
understanding and empathy.

Between imagination and possibility.  
Where the inhale becomes the exhale.

Hope, Peace, Joy and Love reside.

Because a Child was born.

- Florence Niven 2020, Advent Meditation.

Epiphany Meditation by Florence Niven  
2021/02/12

As we explore the theme of Epiphany, I invite you to consider not only the significance of light, but also that of its companion - darkness. Darkness is often thought of as something to fear, thanks to more than a few fairy tales and bible stories, and pandemics. But without darkness we would not be able to fully appreciate the light. Both darkness and light offer valuable lessons.

There's no division  
between night and day

No delineation  
in the night sky -

where one stops  
and the other  
begins

The process  
of night  
becoming day  
is a gradual one

A peaceful transition  
supported by the  
passage of time

Accented by the  
bloom of sunrise  
and sunset

The incremental  
reveal of the moon

The darkness and light  
of night and day  
have roles to play  
Each contribute  
to our well-being  
and are therefore  
essential

Our spirit rests  
in darkness

Is renewed  
And restored

And then is ready  
in the light of day  
for the task at hand

Signs of Renewal by Tysie Mitchell  
2021/04/25

All around us these April days we see signs of renewal.

At no other time, in our Canadian calendar, are we so aware of the colours of new life, than after five months of a landscape of white, black, brown and grey. Now, lawns are greening. A blue haze on last year's dead grass, becomes a carpet of tiny blue scilla. Daffodils nod their lovely yellow heads atop new growth. The sap is running up the maples and, on all the trees, tiny buds are appearing. The squirrels chase each other, and the mating call of birdsong abounds. We look out on the day and we see Spring everywhere.

The inescapable exuberance of Spring never fails to stop me and to invite me to ponder on how this beauty comes to be, how this renewal happens.

For the plants it starts in the soil; soil of varied material and situation: loam, clay, sand, deep, thin, gravelly. There are plants that will thrive in all of them. We feel especially charmed by the little sprout rooted in a seemingly impossible crack in the sidewalk.

Then there is water, delivering nutrients and removing toxins, released from its frozen hiatus, melting from snow, falling as rain, as torrential as gushing rivers, and as mild as morning dew.

Add sunlight: direct, dappled, bending around a north facing wall, something green will work with these light alternatives.

And voila! there you have it, the renewal of life; a gift to us each spring. It seems like a simple recipe, only three ingredients, and the proportions don't even need to be consistent. But take away any one of the ingredients and the plants will not survive.

We look out into Spring and we marvel at an annual ritual which feels new every year, no matter how many years we have seen it. But where do we fit into this ritual of Spring?

Our experience does not follow patterns according to the calendar; our joys, our growth, our sadnesses, our illnesses, indeed even our births and our deaths are not bounded by the terms of the seasons.

So where does our renewal come from? Where is our prescription for abundant life? I like to think that it is found, in the Christian tradition, in 1st Corinthians 13/13. Faith, hope, and love.

Love - such a small word to cover so many feelings. The ancient Greeks had 28 different words for "love". One of my favourites is "agape": to love expecting nothing in return. It is easy to love those near and dear to us but what about those daily encounters with folks we don't even know? On a daily walk in covid time the cheery "hello, lovely day" from a complete stranger behind a mask, the chat with a neighbour from the other side of the street, the sound

of children playing in the yard next door, can make a difference between a gloomy day and a bright one. Love is the soil of our soul, ready to nurture all that will grow in our hearts.

Love

Hope - we use it constantly, probably more often than we realize, to look forward to something better. "I hope it will rain tomorrow; the garden needs it". "I hope I can cuddle my new grandchild by summer". "I hope we can have Christmas in the sanctuary". Hope keeps our love flowing when that which we love is physically out of reach. Just as all of nature thrives with water, so we thrive with hope.

Hope

And then there is "faith".

Faith - as individual as each one of us. For me faith is not belief. Belief is an intellectual choice - I choose to believe or not believe. Faith comes from a place much deeper inside. It defies explanation, but for me the closest I can get is "Interconnectedness", a connection with all of humanity, oneness with the natural world, rocks, trees, stars and water, and especially connection with that which is unknown and unknowable.

Perhaps it is faith that is at the heart of renewal. At those times that winter seems interminable, at those times when the journey of grief is still a long road ahead, at those times when our inner world is grey despite the blossoming of spring outside, it is faith that reassures us that our personal renewal will come again in its own time. In faith we trust that the love and hope within us, and around us, will see us through to our springtime.

Faith.

Each time I enter the sanctuary, be it in person or virtually, and see our beautiful banners so lovingly stitched by women of our congregation I am reminded of our Christian prescription for renewal. For the flowers, soil, water and sun. For humanity. Love, hope, and faith. So be it.

Lessons Learned by Kathy Thomas  
2021/06/17

My back porch sits forlornly empty for yet another year. Here we are: the middle of June, and that porch should be filled with the laughter and fellowship of Spirit Sisters. The hammock sways listlessly and empty in the breeze.

Over this past year and beyond, we have continued to faithfully meet as Spirit Sisters, if only virtually. What does this say about our little group? Maybe it says that we are a circle of like-minded Christian women, called to be together to give each other strength in a time of need, and share wisdom and support. "Where 2 or 3 are gathered in my name, I am there."

So, what, if anything, have we collectively learned over this challenging and sometimes frightening time?

These past 2 years have been filled with lessons learned and much soul searching.

Many of us have found an inner strength that we did not know existed. We learned just how capable and resourceful we really are. We were able to carry on and be strong for our families and loved ones. For everything in our lives that mattered, we carried on. We realized just how much we loved and missed our families.

We have a new appreciation for just how very fragile and unprepared we were for a pandemic, because we are living in a country where this just never happens. We now have an inkling of what it must be like to live in a country where disease runs rampant on a daily basis.

Another lesson learned is that we must be vigilant and proactive from now on, and not assume anything. Tomorrow is guaranteed to no one. The pandemic has taught us to focus on the present and embrace every day. It will help us to face the future.

These difficult times have given us the opportunity to truly appreciate those wonderful front line workers who so bravely did their jobs, while so many of us were living in fear. It seems that we have become a little more dependent on each other: not necessarily a bad thing. We are all facing an unseen force that is non-denominational and faceless.

We have also learned that we all need human interactions to help soften the anxiety that comes from feeling suddenly alone when distance separates us from those we love. French novelist, Marcel Proust has said, "Let us be grateful for those who have made us happy. They are charming gardeners who have made our souls blossom."

We have learned that we really can do with far less than we think. We have learned how to slow down and be mindful of what surrounds us. Reducing all our busyness can remove clutter from our lives, make us more focused and gives us time for reflection and weighing our priorities. We have realized what really matters and that we can let go of that which does

not. We have adapted, grieved for what we have lost, and built our resilience. The things that really matter in life cannot be bought.

We have realized that, strangely enough, there have been some silver linings in all of this. We have learned to accept help from others, give help as we are able, found out who our friends are, and that human kindness can come in many ways. A stranger will make a mask for you and leave it in your mailbox. Many of us have rediscovered the joy of cooking, long, slow walks, board games with our family, how to be teachers and home school children or grandchildren, and that many jobs can be done from home. Has anyone noticed how blue the sky was when there was less air traffic?

Remembering what Linda said about caterpillars and butterflies: a season of isolation is when a butterfly gets its wings. We need to remember that the next time we are feeling lonely.

So, here we are, waiting to be set free, and spread our own wings in the summer sun.

HERE COMES THE SUN!

An old song with a new meaning for us in these times. With the coming of summer, may the light and beauty of this gentle season, truly be a new beginning, to lead us out of the darkness and anguish that has permeated our lives for so long. No matter who we are, we are all free to look upwards and behold the dark sacredness of a summer night and quietly be in awe of the mysteries of the stars and fireflies.

Breathe deeply of the heady fragrances of newly opened roses and the spicy scent of honeysuckle at the beginning of a June twilight.

May our homes once again become havens of peace and contentment, and may summer refresh and restore the weary places within us.

Life is getting better. We are almost there, sisters, so close, so very close.

God of hope, God of grace, Your love is unchanging.

You are there for us, even when we don't realize it.

Wherever we are, You are there, and where You are: all is well.

Still, Small Voice - by Florence Niven  
2021/09/03

I've come to rely on and trust, my still, small voice. My voice of calm and reason. I recognize however, that this voice is not alone in my head, or my heart. It shares those spaces with another. One that is neither still, nor small. In fact it's quite rambunctious.

This other voice vies for my attention with a plethora of opinions, doled out without hesitation, in an eye-rolling, finger-wagging kind of way. It's my inner-critic voice.

My inner critic neatly collates and categorizes all my missteps, omissions, and fumbles. Casually sorting through and highlighting them, when bored. Which seems to be quite often.

My not-so-still, nor small, voice, is very good at what it does. By repeatedly pushing my 'rewind' and 'play' buttons, it reminds me of oversights and stumbles I'd have otherwise long forgotten. It delights in recounting every embarrassing moment I've ever experienced, every unkind word I've ever spoken. Usually as part of its 2am ritual.

It's goal is to trap me in an endless loop of reliving, reworking and reimagining the endings of my stories. Ambushing me by pointing out the obvious: what I could have - should have - done. What I could have - should have - said.

But didn't.

It takes practice and patience to calm the cacophony of the judgmental inner-critic voice, in order to hear - and listen - to the still, small one.

Yet the still, small voice is where wisdom and clarity reside. It's where breathing space abounds.

I've learned to acknowledge the critical voice as part of the process; stay with it until it settles. Then step away. Carry on with the task of living and learning. Embrace the opportunities for sharing and growth, creativity and celebration.

In the convergence of community and collaboration, there's an abundance of empathy, compassion and understanding just waiting to be discovered. It's there for all of us, if we're able to placate our inner critic, and allow our still, small voices to be our guide.

- Florence Niven, September 20

Courage and Comfort - by Gary Smith  
2021/11/11

## Courage and Comfort

"I believe prayer is talking to God, and meditation is listening to God!"

I'll be sharing with you this and other selected Quotable Quotes that I've found worthy during the past twenty years and, now integral to two stories - one a story told; the second a story learned.

First, a thought-piece as I remembered it told here (June 23, 2019), bears repeating, because it is the message that prompted me to write this address:

A little girl was busily drawing a picture, when her teacher asked her, "What are you drawing?"

The little girl answered, "God."

The teacher responded, cautiously, "But, nobody knows what God looks like." "Just wait 'til I'm finished."

"A young man, Mannie (he didn't feel worthy of 'Emmanuel') was pedalling his mountain bike along the verge of a narrow country road, wanting to improve his self-image, when passed at speed by a car that immediately left the road and, crashed upon encountering a heavy lorry. He dropped his bike and ran to the car; there was a strong smell of petrol and, he heard a child screaming in the back; he wrenched open the door, released her harness and pulled her free, then ran to put some space between the car and his burden.

Young Karen calmed and quieted, and took a firm hold of her rescuer's neck with both arms and, buried her face in the space under his chin. Reaching a grassy bank, he sank to the ground, the child still clinging to his neck beneath him.

Karen's mother was released from the front passenger seat by the trucker who carried her towards her child, and screamed, "You pervert! What do you think you're doing? Let her go!" She was way beyond reason already, angry at her husband and the lorry driver and, grabbed Karen and dragged her away from Mannie, breaking the child's grip on his neck. The child, aware only of the sudden, rough attack on her comfort, burst into tears.

At the mother's rebuke, while the accident was traumatic all round, there was no apparent reason for Mannie to retreat into, well, catatonia ... but he did.

Emergency Services responded to the accident, took photos and statements, and removed the driver's body. All was attended to ... except Mannie, curled up in the grass, to be cared for by the ambulance personnel.

Mannie was assessed and, eventually placed in a private psychiatric clinic, where he did not utter a word or, look at his questioners.

The child, Karen became very quiet and withdrawn, and remained so for months. Only, at the funeral for the deceased father, did Karen whisper to the Vicar, "Pway for Mister Cuddles."

18 months later, Karen was walking, listlessly with her mother when she pulled her, urgently toward a church doorway. Karen detached her hand and, walked purposefully down the centre aisle. She reached the altar-rail and knelt, looking up at the cross on the altar and, began praying. She then stood and, trotted over to the Vicar she then recognized.

"The nice man I was just talking to, said you'd help me find Mr. Cuddles," she told the Vicar, who asked,

"Did he tell you his name?" "No, but he knew my name."

She took the Vicar's hand and they walked up to the altar-rail and knelt there, where a Presence attended the Vicar, telling her where 'Mr. Cuddles' was, and saying, "You need to take them to see Emmanuel."

The child said, "He was here again. He touched your shoulder."

The three: mother, child and the Vicar, travelled to the private clinic, where they were shown to a room. Karen took off, across the room to a young man that the others didn't recognise, sitting passively, eyes focused on something a long way outside the windows. She climbed up into his lap and, wrapped her arms round his neck. When he didn't move or speak, she rocked back to look at his face.

"Mr. Cuddles? Remember me?"

No response. She turned and looked at the Vicar. "I think he needs for you to pray for him."

"I think he needs you to pray for him," the Vicar said, "but I'll pray too, if you like."

"Yes please. Stand behind him, please..."

When the Vicar was in position, hands on the young man's head, the little girl looked up at her for several seconds, then, nodded and placed her little hands each side of his face. Looking straight into the Vicar's eyes, she said, "Mr. Jesus, will you help my friend and make him well, please?"

The Vicar wasn't expecting to feel the heat in her hands that sometimes, happened when she prayed for someone; she hadn't thought or said a thing, and yet...

"My hands are hot!" Karen squeaked in surprise, but kept her hands on his face.

The young man went limp and, his eyes shut. "Mr. Cuddles?" Karen's voice was a croon.

His eyes opened and, widened as he saw the little blonde girl-child, who beamed at him and, wrapped her arms round his neck again. His own arms reflexively wrapped round her. He turned his head to see the mother. His arms fell away and fear showed on his face.

"Mr. Cuddles," Karen said in his ear, "it's okay, really. She isn't angry anymore. " She turned to look at her mother, "Are you, Mummy?"

"No, Sweetheart, I'm not."

Now, imagine a moment 60 years after the end of World War II in Europe:

A Holocaust survivor dies of old age and goes to Heaven, and tells God a Holocaust joke.

God says, "That's not funny."

The survivor says, "I guess you had to be there."

It's a double entendre; not meant to be funny. I tell you this because it's a question raised by peoples the World over, in the face of subservience or genocide. "Was God there, with us?" "Am I here with God?" "Is our faith enough to ease us through this pain?" "Am I just a believer in orderly, scheduled ritual?"

"In matters that impact faith, you aren't supposed to 'know'. It wouldn't require faith if you 'knew'."

The Nazi's of Germany didn't invent the concentration camp ... they just made it more efficient, including records up to a point. Between 1933 and 1941, they already detained 'For their own Protection' approximately 165,000 German Communists, Jehovah's Witness believers, Roma gypsy, or homosexual lifestyle, for political reasons, or otherwise 'undesirable'.

This was a war in which countless Allied soldiers and Resistance fighters died or were wounded, without knowing that 6 million people, men, women and children, of Jewish faith were being systematically ... 'eliminated', between 1941 to 1945, in camps or killing centres westward from Russia to France and, north to Norway and Latvia.

Less formal estimates include up to 5 million others, including those already detained plus Russian prisoners of war and, others as 'criteria' changed.

My father, Tommy and his older brother by 7 years, Alex joined up in 1940 but only Alex went 'over there'. Dad served for 25 years as an airframe technician, here and in Europe during the Cold War. I don't know in which year Alex went to England as a member of two armies: the Salvation Army and the Canadian Army.

He was 'a cook in the camps' he once told me, then a young man ... nothing more.

Perhaps he didn't tell his family much more than that, either. I can comprehend the magnitude of feeding 1000 men in all weather, long before the creation of C-rations and contemporary MRE (Meal, Ready to Eat). The 'kitchen' had to keep pace with the Battalion, cookery had to be clean and, the soldier had faith that his Sergeant knew where the mess tent was. I thought Alex meant military encampments only, until in 2010, I discovered in my parent's effects nine personal photos of a concentration camp (name unknown) in the jurisdiction of the 2nd Army, where the detainees were women still surviving Typhus and other illnesses. I choose to believe that Alex prepared meals, for these survivors and not just, the military or emergency personnel who also stayed to help them. About 900,000 souls were found in the various camps, at the end in Europe.

This certainly wasn't what he or any of the Allied military joined up for and, any doubts about why they or their comrades came home broken, or not at all, must have been eased by the revelation of the horror that greeted them and, that they had put a stop to at the end of the road.

When he did come home in 1946, Alex continued to 'cook', for Sunnybrook Hospital and provide comfort to 'The Vets', until his retirement; including those young/old men that no one recognised, sitting passively; eyes focused on something a long way outside the windows ... that 'thousand yard stare'.

"I was taught that people, who took risks without fear, were brave. Well, far braver are those that take risks despite their fear. Courage is fear that has said its prayers."

In closing: Each of the major religions is guided by 10 Commandments (or Disciplines); some with more.

Young potential disciples don't want to hear 'Thou shalt not' from anyone, let alone a religion that advocates forgiveness for not keeping their pledge. We must have the answers when they ask 'Why not?' or 'How do I?' ... if they ask at all. The very young know where the kitchen is. As they grow and 'patrol' farther with friends, remind them where the kitchen is and welcome them even when they're late. Soon enough, they will travel further and need to create their own kitchens based on your example.

Jesus gave Christian disciples 1 Commandment (John 13: 34-35, New Living Translation):

'34 Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other.

35 Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.'

Is it any wonder that during over 2000 years CE, Christians have been largely unable to keep even that 1 Commandment?

"God has pretty much a hands-off attitude towards humans. His will is expressed as much in His silence as in His speaking; in His inaction as in His acting. This is His will for you. The only way He could do something about human suffering, disease , inequality, or the environment, is by removing choice from us. You get to choose good or evil and, since you want to have choices ... live with the consequences."

"When in need of comfort, pray the prayer your creator or deity has given you

... whatever His or Her name. Yours may not be the same prayer as any others' pray but, it and theirs will be received by the one to whom it is addressed."

Let us pray:

- Gary Smith

Advent Meditation by Florence Niven  
2021/12/04

It's that time of year again. Time to dust off our memories of Christmas past, and display them lovingly throughout our homes and churches.

Christmas is different this year. How can it not be? We've had over a year and a half to think about the way things were. What we hold most dear, of course, what we've learned, but also - what we've lost. What no longer carries meaning; what no longer works. The pandemic has changed every little thing about every little thing, including how we approach the Advent season.

As we deck the halls with bows of holly, and reap the benefits of fewer restrictions, I hope we take the opportunity to honour the lessons of our time in isolation. Sift through the memories of Advents past - carefully and mindfully. Preserve those we most value, but have the courage to relinquish - or at least reimagine - those that no longer hold meaning.

Perhaps this is the year we place Hope, Peace, Joy and Love at the top of our wish lists.

Shall we follow the memories  
of Advents past

that linger in the periphery -

back to when it was safe  
for friends and loved ones  
to gather?

Shall we unpack them one by one

hold them tenderly in our hands  
and assign to each an equal value

unique, precious -

polish even  
the less than ideal reminders

of long line ups and lost luggage  
and heightened anxiety

until they glisten  
behind rose coloured glass?

Shall we retrieve from layers of tissue paper  
the masks we used to hide behind -

ones less obvious  
than those made with cloth  
and secured with elastic -

that we might wear them yet again?

Or shall we choose instead  
to embrace only those parts  
of our Advents past

that remain most dear?

Remember fondly - what once was  
relinquish - what no longer holds meaning  
reimagine - what no longer works

then step bravely into the opportunities  
offered by this new Advent.

And celebrate  
the blessings of the season  
with faith restored

and hope

renewed.

- Florence Niven

Meditation: Imagine by Florence Niven  
2022/06/15

Celebrating Diversity, Equity and Inclusion – this month and every month.

Imagine if we looked at the world through rose coloured glass, and led with kindness rather than fear. Would that be a bad thing?

Imagine if our conversations and interactions started from a place of acceptance and empathy rather than judgement and assumption.

Imagine if we stepped back and took a breath before making accusations, or lashing out in anger, or pushing send. Just stepped back. And took a deep cleansing breath. And praised God for the blessing that makes each of us a unique part of the Whole.

Imagine.

...

colour me in tints of kindness  
filtered light of empathy  
highlights of compassion  
aqua and lilac and sage

render me with tender marks of longing  
subtle shades of remembrance  
haunting hues of loss  
mauve and chartreuse and peach

paint me with bold strokes of tolerance  
bodacious accents of inclusivity  
saturated pigments of audacity  
magenta and crimson and emerald

teach me through the painting  
teach me through the process

trust

trust

splatters of judgment, self-doubt, bitterness  
slate and umber and rust  
teach me the lessons  
that I might create

with sensitivity

colour me with honesty  
render me with humility  
paint me with imagination  
and stagnation  
and laughter  
and tears  
and contentment  
and anger  
and friendship  
and loneliness

discern the teachings of the under painting

colour me with tints of kindness  
filtered light of empathy  
highlights of compassion  
aqua and lilac and sage

- Florence Niven

Meditation by Carolyn McPhee  
2022/07/24

I would like to share with you a very lovely poem about water lilies by the poet Mary Oliver. She was an American poet who was inspired by nature, stemming from her lifelong passion for solitary walks in the outdoors.

The Ponds

Every year  
the lilies  
are so perfect  
I can hardly believe  
their lapping light crowding the  
black,  
mid-summer ponds.

Nobody could count all of them...  
the muskrats swimming  
can reach out  
and touch  
only so many, they are that  
rife and wild.

But what in this world  
is perfect?  
I bend closer and see  
how this one is clearly lopsided...  
and that one wears an orange blight...  
and this one is a glossy cheek  
half nibbled away...  
and that one is a slumped purse  
full of its own  
unstoppable decay.

Still, what I want in my life  
is to be willing  
to be dazzled...  
to cast aside the weight of facts  
and maybe even  
to float a little  
above this difficult world.

I want to believe I am looking  
Into the white fire of a great mystery.  
I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing...

that the light is everything...  
that it is more than the sum  
of each flawed blossom rising and fading.  
And I do.

Mary Oliver

I love to go kayaking in a marsh area of our lake that is very close to our cottage. I especially like to go on a sunny day because the multitudes of water lilies are all open and so beautiful. I paddle through the lilies filled with awe and I stop to look more closely at them. When I do, I am always surprised to see that almost every lily has imperfections. From a distance they looked like a mass of perfect beauty. One of the reasons I am so taken with this poem is because Mary Oliver describes so beautifully this very same thing.

But I also relate so deeply to the emotional part of this poem...

“I want to believe I am looking into the white fire of a great mystery.  
I want to believe that the imperfections are nothing...  
that the light is everything...  
that it is more than the sum  
of each flawed blossom rising and fading.  
And I do.”

Some very powerful words here—mystery, imperfections, light. We are all flawed blossoms, but we are all still perfectly, perfect humans. We live in a world that so often seems full of darkness, imperfections, and stress. But God calls us to live in the light. To strive to continue to see the beauty in each other and in nature. God calls us to dwell in the divine mystery of our lives. To accept our own imperfections, and to strive, as the song says, to let our little lights shine. I am reminded of a favourite quote of mine by Leonard Cohen...

“Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering.  
There is a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in.”

I want to close with a blessing from a beautiful song by the artist Snatam Kaur...

“May the long time sun, shine upon you.  
All love surround you.  
And the pure light within you,  
Guide your way on  
Guide your way on.”

Thanksgiving Musings by Florence Niven  
2022/10/02

My neighbour was spending Thanksgiving in another city, visiting her family. I had entered her house using the spare key she'd left in case of an emergency. This was an emergency. Once again I'd battled a turkey. Once again the turkey fought back. I threw the roasting pan in her oven. Then sat in her living room. Stewing.

I have to confess - even at the best of times, the kitchen is not a place where I like to spend my time. Oh sure, I try to prepare meals rich in colour and texture that follow the nutritional guidelines, but there are so many other things I'd rather be doing than standing in the kitchen, slicing and dicing.

Over the years, my husband has offered to help, but he and I work at different speeds. My kitchen style is decisive and efficient. My goal: a quick exit. His is measured and exacting. By the time he has the mushrooms perfectly cut and evenly spaced on a homemade pizza, my interest has waned.

You're probably thinking the obvious solution would be for me to resign from kitchen duty and let him take over. I've suggested this over the years, but it's an idea that's met with marked resistance. Seems my husband, despite his fastidious placement of mushroom and red pepper pieces, enjoys being in the kitchen about as much as I do. So I cook, and he does the post-meal clean up. Our meals will never be gourmet, but neither will we starve. It's a system that works, for the most part. At least until a turkey is thrown in the mix.

Preparing the full Thanksgiving dinner pushes me well beyond my culinary comfort zone. And although I'd like to think I've learned a few things to better manage this meal, I still face some challenges.

For years the very real fear of my guests developing food poisoning prevented me from allowing the turkey to thaw for more than two days in the refrigerator. Consequently I've spent many early mornings wrestling a partially frozen bird that was clearly unwilling to relinquish its giblets. I've since realized that allowing an extra day for thawing, facilitates a much calmer transition from fridge to roasting pan. And I no longer have the urge to hurl a semi-thawed carcass out the kitchen window. I see this as personal growth.

I've discovered the best time to tackle a turkey is first thing in the morning. Before I'm fully awake. Sneak up on the gobbler before it knows what's happening. Once it's nestled in the roasting pan, 'to stuff' or 'not to stuff', becomes the question. The answer depends on how the morning is unfolding.

A few years ago a friend suggested I cook the turkey early - a day, or even week before the main event. Brilliant! Cooking a turkey early means it can be sliced and the mess cleaned up, well before any guests arrive, which leaves the impression that I know what I'm doing. At dinnertime, it's a simple matter of steaming the turkey slices, once a stove element becomes available.

About that...

For some reason, choosing the side dishes remains for me, an enigma. Most are a collection of family favourites - tried and true. Quite often however, I add something new to the menu. There's no explanation for this. It's a detail that trips me up every time. It doesn't occur to me there's a problem until I've lined up five items that require a stove element, next to our four-element stove. Although I've become quite adept at shuffling the various pots around the stovetop in a chaotic game of Musical Burners, it's less than ideal.

For the past ten years, a good friend, someone who loves working in the kitchen (one of those...), has dropped off a jar of her delicious homemade Cranberry Chutney for our special meal. It's become a much-anticipated part of our holiday tradition. Of course if she's travelling, I resort to the store-bought gelatinous blob that plops out of the can. I've discovered that if I jab the blob vigorously with a fork I can eliminate the tell-tale indentations that belie its origins. Although there's no comparison to the homemade variety, taming the wobble makes it slightly more palatable.

Perhaps the most important lesson I've learned over the years is that a beautiful tablescape is a wonder to behold, and will divert attention away from the food.

All modesty aside, I set a beautiful table. The navy table cloth and matching napkins secured with bows of jute and sprigs of berries pulled from my garden; the centrepiece of magenta and amber vine submerged beneath water in cylindrical glass vases - each with a floating candle; the delicate vintage Depression Glass serving dishes containing various condiments - I have this part down. If only I could find someone to do the rest...

But I digress. I was telling you about the Thanksgiving I spent at our neighbour's.

I had approached that morning with determined resolve. The turkey was fully thawed, and in the oven in record time. The table was set and the side dishes prepped, long before the rest of the household arose. I was, I must say, rather impressed with myself. However, when I went to baste the turkey for the first time, it's naked body looked shockingly pallid. I asked my husband for his opinion. He assured me it was fine. He also reminded me that I panic about cooking the turkey every year. This last comment was not helpful.

An hour later, when I opened the oven again, I was temporarily blinded by the glare of the slick white torso. Once more I consulted my husband. "Well, the oven's warm," he said. "I'm sure it will be fine."

A half an hour later I yanked the anaemic bird out of the oven and told my husband to get the car - he was driving me, and the bird, to our neighbour's.

Seems one of the elements in our oven had burned out. Seems you need both to cook a turkey. Our guests ate much later than planned that night.

Our dinner table, like that of so many other families, looked very different during the Covid years. When we first learned about social distancing and family bubbles, we adjusted our plans and purchased the World's Smallest Turkey. Consequently, it thawed much earlier than anticipated. We had Thanksgiving Dinner for lunch on Thursday that year. The table was unadorned. There was very little fanfare. The actual Thanksgiving Day was the most relaxing ever, spent visiting with family and friends from coast to coast via Zoom. The refrigerator filled with leftovers, ready and waiting.

Which got me to thinking. Perhaps it's not about the turkey and side dishes, after all. Forced to isolate, we still found ways to connect with family and friends.

This year, for the first time in a long time, our family plans to gather in person. I'd like it to be a Thanksgiving like no other. With the emphasis on what's really important about the holiday - time spent together. Feeling blessed by the people around the table, and filled with gratitude. A time of easy conversation, warm hugs and lots of laughter.

And I'm thinking I might serve salmon. No fuss, no muss. No gravy. No stuffing. No Cranberry Chutney. Ok, maybe some Cranberry Chutney. Because it's really good, and - let's face it - goes with any meal.

But overall, I'd like it to be a celebration of all those things for which we are truly thankful, yet too often take for granted. Those things that we missed so dearly when we were told to isolate. Those things above and beyond what we place on the table.

by Florence Niven

The Role of Women in our Church by Gordon Sinclair  
2023/06/27

Reflections by Gordon Sinclair

Just as Spirit Sisters play a critical role in the life of our church these days, and Catholic nuns continue to do their work, in some places in the world more than others, women have always added strength and vitality to the life of a congregation.

In the history of the United Church, two women's organizations, the Women's Missionary Society (WMS) and the Women's Association (WA), predated the United Church Women (UCW), formed in 1962.

The WMS, as the name suggests, was a world mission-orientated organization, that, at one point in its history, supported as many as 100 missionaries all over the world.

"Women have not only provided the major support for mission in the modern era but also early recognized the need to found their own societies and send their own missionaries. In much of the world, because of local customs, women missionaries could perform services for other women and for children, especially in medicine and education, that men could not undertake. Their greatest impact was in the production of vast corps of able and educated women, especially in Asia, who played major roles in the professions and in church leadership". Encyclopedia Britannica

I have fond memories of my sister Shirley and me singing duets as early as ages 4 and 5 at WMS rallies at Trinity United Church in the east end of London, ON. Betty Jeanne Kippen remembers playing piano accompanying her sister Helen on violin for WMS events in Yarker.

The WA stressed the importance of fellowship, with a local church and community focus. Guilds and Ladies' Aids were the WA's forerunners; in the early years, these units were unrecorded, doing just what was needed to be done in their local churches, spiritually, financially and socially.

As the twentieth century, however, approached the twenty-first, the separation of church and state in many countries, the secularization of society generally, the increase in women working outside the home, and the association of missionaries with colonialism, all combined to see enthusiasm for missions seriously decline. More and more women became members of Council, Ministry & Personnel, and other roles formerly occupied solely by men. This involvement may have had an affect on women's groups as well.

UCW at Edith Rankin sprang to life in 1962, shortly after the church itself came into being, and, at its peak in the 1980s had 8 separate UCW units, each with 20-25 members.

The UCW Mission Statement says it all: To love God, to foster Christian faithfulness, spirituality, commitment and devotion, and to promote love and respect by living generously

and giving joyfully to all God's people and to affirm all God's people and to affirm and strengthen ourselves creatively.

Our UCW prepared and delivered an annual worship service, normally the Sunday after Easter.

Our UCW organized the annual Classics Birthday Party.

Our UCW has supported and managed the library at Edith Rankin.

Our UCW, most often in an unheralded, modest fashion, took care of many of the financial, social and spiritual needs of our community of faith.

Our UCW was very active over the years in Outreach with these agencies and projects, including:

Almost Home

Alzheimer's Society

Amherstview Food drive

Dawn House

Better Beginnings

Food Bank

Food Sharing Project

HIV/AIDS

In From the Cold

Lily's Place

Martha's Table

Salvation Army Food Drive

Santa Sacs

Street Mission

Vincent de Paul

Youth Shelter

By any measure, an impressive record of service to our community.

Something striking about women's groups here at Edith Rankin, and likely at most churches, is that they all share a quality of genuinely caring for one another and supporting one another. This is not to suggest that there was never any disagreement or unpleasantness. But over-all the care and connection are ever-present. In that sense, they are a model for the rest of us.

With the dissolution of our UCW in 2022, members were faced with a choice: were they to just fade away, disappear from view, or were they to continue their work in a re-invented framework. For many years they had been the backbone of church life supporting their church in uncounted ways.

Luckily for us, they chose the second option, leaving us with four groups who meet regularly: Still #1, U 2 Forever, Mary Marthas, and Crazy 8's. Knowing the women in our church, they, as

they always have, will continue to stir our hearts and minds, care for one another, and achieve great things.

Spirit Sisters came into being in 2006, and continues to the present day to meet the spiritual needs of the women of our church. In addition to their spiritual quest, they also model the qualities of caring connections, common to all women's groups included in this reflection. Spirit Sisters also have prepared/led an annual church service for over a decade, usually offered in late May - the first service they led is how the church ended up with the gift of the artistic paintings in the Welcome Centre by Janice Swaren - women who followed Jesus.

In that same spirit of caring and connection, other groups have formed in earlier years as circumstances presented themselves. Mourning Glories was a group of women, recently bereaved, who, with some guidance and support from each other and female ministry staff, found their way through their loss.

Similarly, a group calling themselves The Oasis Group supported working women in navigating through the challenges associated with working and family life.

It is likely that, moving into the future, women will join together as needs and circumstances change in order to support each other and to make a contribution to church life.

Women working together at Edith Rankin, with stunning consistency through the years since 1962, have been faithful to their mission of caring for and supporting one another. Building on this robust base of fellowship, the women of Edith Rankin have served and continue to serve both their congregation and their community with distinction. They are deeply loved and respected for their efforts and are deserving of a generous expression of gratitude from the congregation.

#### Acknowledgements

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June, 2023

Joy ... Anyway by Kathy Thomas  
2023/06/27

Joy, anyway. Powerful words. More than that, they are empowering words. For the last few years, Joy seems to have been somewhat elusive in this world. Have we not all been through at least two years of Covid, family and health issues, and weather that is out of the ordinary?

It is so easy to become sorrowful or cynical when we feel like we are merely the gravel on the road of life. Grist for the mill. Who cares? Maybe what we have been missing all along is simply: Joy.

Life is a hard road to travel, I believe. Who among us has not felt pain, sorrow, or disappointment? Our greatest ally in overcoming the pitfalls of life is to remember that Joy is more powerful than any negativity. Light always defeats the darkness.

Life in general can be overwhelmingly complicated, but Joy is simple. Joy is about how we focus our lives despite our personal circumstances. Joy does not depend on what happens next. Joy is a light, a beacon within us. It is actually an amazing freedom that resides in our souls.

No one can take this from us. We can shape our own thoughts and strive to find all that is positive and good in life. It is up to us. Contentment is priceless. Joy is a reward in itself.

It seems that we are always waiting for something. We wait for the weekend; we wait for life to improve, always waiting for happiness. We do not have to wait for Joy to show up; it is already in us. It can refresh a weary soul like a fountain of youth.

It is only human to often feel joy and grief at the same time. This leads to healing and being realistic about our struggles. The joy part makes sorrow easier to cope with over time. Joy is the presence of God.

We can all find Joy in the ordinary. It is within each of us. Remember that we are capable of finding Joy, even in the smallest of daily events. The sun really does shine for us all. The touch of an errant breeze caressing our cheek, or an unexpected patch of blue in a cloudy sky can bring delight. The morning Joy of rising up anew on each new day is ours alone.

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Joy just seems easier to come by in the summer. There is truly so much beauty and magic all around us. Sunlight is joyful. It is the most precious gold on earth. Joy is found in the flowers, the whisper of a misty summer rain, sensual sultry evenings heavy with the perfume of grasses, roses and lilacs can transform our sense of being. Idle time spent sitting on the back porch and reverently dwelling on the mystery of the stars, is never time wasted.

Joy...anyway. It sounds way too easy. Not enough effort, when feeling down, is where we sometimes really want to be. Yes, it is a choice, but it is there for everyone.

Emily Dickinson has said, "The mere sense of living is Joy enough."

We have the power within us to choose the peace and Joy of God.

Mother Teresa has said, "Spread love everywhere you go. Let no one come to you without leaving happier." I would make a small change here, and change love to Joy.

Joy multiplies when shared by friends. It only takes a spark to get a fire going....

Sometimes, the best sermons are often not preached!

And in closing: may we remember with fondness and love, our dear sisters, Elizabeth Jeffrey and Susan Gibbon who left us way too soon. Their lives and memories will always be a blessing. It was a privilege to know them and call them "sisters". Their parting left us sorrowful, but the afterglow of knowing them and having walked with them through the shadows, will ensure that they shall remain in our hearts with joy. Joy truly is the presence of God.

From Romans 12:15

"Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep",

and from Romans 15:13

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace, as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

June, 2023

Advent 2023 by Florence Niven  
2023/12/17

beyond anxiety  
beyond isolation  
beyond age-old conflict  
that seems beyond resolution

Hope resides

Hope lives in the quiet spaces

of wish-filled longing  
and fervent prayer

between imagination and possibility

Hope resides,  
because a Child was born

beyond broken promises  
broken systems  
broken policies -

that demoralize  
dehumanize  
and demonize...

Peace resides

Peace lives in the quiet spaces

of acknowledgment  
respectful action  
significant change

between imagination and possibility

Peace resides  
because a Child was born

in places of awe  
and unabashed wonder  
where Hope

and Peace flourish -

untethered  
unencumbered

where authenticity is celebrated...  
Joy resides

between imagination and possibility

Joy resides  
because a Child was born

beyond hate-filled rhetoric  
abuse of power

broad strokes -  
that divide  
suppress  
and marginalize...

Love resides

Love lives in the quiet spaces  
of hard work and heart work

compassion and commitment  
understanding and empathy

between imagination and possibility

where the inhale becomes the exhale.

Hope, Peace, Joy and Love reside  
because a Child was born

- Florence Niven, 17 Dec 2023

God Is Still Present - by Rev. Joe Ramsay  
2020/03/20

Many of us, I think, are still in a state of shock from the extent to which our world is affected by the emergence of the Covid-19 virus. Many of us have never experience in our lifetime an event that has so profoundly united humanity in our common vulnerability and need for each other.

For people of faith, the question that emerges in any of life's important moments, whether considered good or bad, is "Where is God in all this?" As I was asking that question, I stumbled on a passage from the preacher and writer Frederick Buechner. I share it here and hope that his words can give you hope and courage.

ON THE EVENING OF THE DAY the World Trade Center was destroyed by terrorists, a service was hastily improvised in one of the largest New York churches, where crowds of both believers and nonbelievers came together in search of whatever it is people search for at such times—some word of reassurance, some glimmer of hope.

"At times like these," the speaker said, "God is useless."

When I first heard of it, it struck me as appalling, and then it struck me as very brave, and finally it struck me as true.

When horrors happen we can't use God to make them unhappen any more than we can use a flood of light to put out a fire or Psalm 23 to find our way home in the dark.

All we can do is to draw close to God and to each other as best we can, the way those stunned New Yorkers did, and to hope that, although God may well be useless when all hell breaks loose, there is nothing that happens, not even hell, where God is not present with us and for us.

-Originally published

Jesus Set His Face towards Jerusalem - by Rev. Bill Smith  
2020/03/24

In a time when my mind is usually focused on the lead up to Easter and the variety of ways in which we recognize and celebrate the Resurrection Story, today, like many of you, my thoughts revolve around Covid-19 and our response to this pandemic virus. As you are aware, our Council has cancelled services until Palm Sunday, April 5th and will be meeting toward the end of March to see if this remains a safe date. As important as Easter is to us as Christians, we can recognize and celebrate it at any given time throughout the year, but your health must be of primary importance as of now!

You may have noticed in recent bulletins that Holy Week Services had been planned. These involved a number of tactile activities, a pot-luck dinner, hand washing, and Communion to name a few. Even if we re-commence services on Palm Sunday, these services will have to be modified or cancelled to ensure the safety of all. Please stay tuned to our web site or congregational mailings for updates.

It is hard to believe how a virus can make the world stand still. Schools and sporting teams, many offices and churches are heeding the concerns expressed by the WHO to be extra diligent in hand washing, do not gather in large groups and self-quarantine if you have any signs of symptoms.

As a faith community, we want to be here for you during this uncertainty. We are attempting to post 'virtual worship experiences' online. This is something that is new for us as it may be to you. Please be patient with us as we seek the best ways to reach out. Know that our thoughts and prayers are with you.

Feel free to email at any time or call if that would be better for you. Know that you are not alone. That is the first sentence in our Creed. While we may be practicing 'social distancing', we have a 'spiritual closeness' which is also contagious, but in a good way!

The Lenten journey begins with the Biblical phrase ... and 'Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem.' There were many hardships along the way...human disappointment, emotional stress, physical pain. But, Jesus knew that his faith would give him strength to deal with this and that these things too would pass. At the end was the victory and the empty tomb.

The world has not stopped, only put on pause for a bit. May God give us strength in these times. I look forward to the day, when we can say 'the virus has passed' and we can be reunited, face to face as the family of God.

In the meantime, keep safe, keep well, know the God's presence surrounds you and soon we will be together to shout and celebrate. **THE LORD IS RISEN ... HE IS RISEN INDEED**

Be Not Afraid - by Rev. Joe Ramsay  
2020/03/24

I remember hearing a story about an off-Broadway matinee being performed on November 22, 1963. There was a moment in the play when one of the characters listens to a transistor radio. As a prop, the character used a real radio, and simply tuned in to the current broadcast. During the particular performance, the actor turned on the radio shortly after 1:30 pm, just as the voice on the radio was announcing that President JF Kennedy had been assassinated. Everyone stopped on stage, the rest of the play was cancelled, the world had changed in an instant.

Our world is constantly changing and events can occur suddenly and unexpectedly — in our lives, in our families, in our neighbourhoods, in our world. Sometimes what suddenly emerges in life is a welcomed and joyful surprise. A child living at a distance shows up suddenly just to say happy birthday. Good news about a diagnosis is delivered when you expected the worst. A movement emerges led by our youth calling us to address global warming and instilling hope in us.

More often, it seems, changes that emerge make us fearful. A beloved leader is shot, a terminal diagnosis is given, news is delivered that global warming is worse than we thought, or a life-threatening virus suddenly appears and reaches a global pandemic level in just a few weeks. We are living in such a time, when all of us have reason to be afraid — for ourselves, for those we love, and for our world.

It is not surprising, really, that the expression that appears the most often in the Bible is “Do not be afraid.” Jesus uttered this expression more than any other. In these fearful times we, as the church of Jesus, can draw on our faith in a loving God who brings resurrection from death, hope from fear.

We often think that faith is the opposite of fear, but in fact, love is really the opposite of fear. This week, these words were posted on our United Church of Canada website:  
As a church, we seek a compassionate response that acknowledges the personhood attached to each statistic. We know that the people affected include not only those infected by the COVID-19 virus but also their families, friends, co-workers, and community members. We mourn with people whose loved ones have died, who have lost their livelihood through the growing economic impact, who have lost community through self-isolation and limited travel, and, who have lost a sense of security through fear of contamination or racial discrimination. We also offer our prayers of thanksgiving for the professionals who are providing leadership in the treatment and containment of the virus, and our prayers of concern for those who put at risk their personal health to serve and support others, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Like the words that blurted unexpectedly on a New York stage in in 1963, the news of the Covid-19 virus has suddenly changed our story and created fear among us. So let us respond as a community of faith by becoming even more diligent in our love for each other, for our families, for our neighbours and for our world.

Death and Resurrection Revisted - by Rev. Joe Ramsay  
2020/04/11

This Easter, for most of us, is unlike any Easter we have ever known. This Easter we are making sense of the Death and Resurrection story in the midst of a Human Crisis story.

Most of us have experienced some sort of personal crisis ... sickness, the loss of a job, a car wreck. Sometimes the crisis has extended to our family and friends ... the death of a child or a house fire. Some even may have experienced a community-wide crisis ... a flood, tornado or plant closure. But for most of us, this is the first time we have experience a human crisis with such dramatic and immediate effect. There is no person, no community, no country that has been spared the impact of Covid-19. We are affected everywhere at all levels by the human suffering and death caused by this tiny virus. This year, the Good Friday story is everyone's story and together as the human race we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The good news of the Gospel is that, because God was in Christ, because God takes on flesh, the Human Crisis story is also God's story.

This year, our Easter scripture comes from the Gospel of John. In this Gospel, it is very clear that Jesus is God in the flesh, and not merely human. In the Jesus of John's Gospel, God is in our world, suffering at our hands — but remains fully God, the creator and giver of life. It is not Herod, or Pilate, or some virus that determines our life — it is God. When Pilate asks Jesus why he isn't afraid of him, Jesus answered, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given to you from above." So when we ask the question "Where is God in all of this?" for John the answer is clear. God is here in the midst of it all — suffering along with us, yet still the source of all that is. As always, from Death, God creates Life. So even at this Easter-like-no-other we proclaim, "O Death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?" From darkness will come light, from suffering will come joy, from death will come resurrection.

What might resurrection look like for us weeks, months or years from now? For the truth is, this is not the first time we have experienced a Human Crisis. We have been living in a Human Crisis for a very long time, to which most of us are insensitive or ambivalent. We are destroying this planet which is home for all of us. Poverty and homelessness are not problems for just a few, they are human problems. About 1,000 humans die from Malaria every day and have been for a very long time.

I wonder what Resurrection will look like for us as God calls us forth from these tombs? What new life will God breathe into us and into our world? Will we start caring for our poor? Will we ramp up treatments for malaria and other killers in marginalized nations? Will we wake and hear the groans from our planet's land, air and seas? Will factories that have been transformed to make life-giving products be retooled to serve the common good? Will human beings emerge from this more compassionate, more peaceful and more just?

We are an Easter People and so we live in the hope of Resurrection. In the darkest of times we sing: "This joyful Eastertide, away with sin and sorrow! My Love, the Crucified, has sprung

to life this morrow: Death's flood has lost its chill since Jesus crossed the river; Lover of souls,  
from ill my passing soul deliver."

How Can I Sing? by Rev. Bill Smith  
2020/04/15

Last week, a reading from the Psalms popped into my mind ... How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:4). It struck me that our church buildings have been closed for four weeks with at least another four ahead of us. We, a people with tremendous freedoms have been told to stay inside, to self-isolate or be subject to large fines if we don't. We, who live in our cars as much as our homes, running here and there, are told to keep off the highways. This is truly a foreign land!

If someone would have painted this picture for me a few years back, I would not have believed it. How would we survive as a people, as a nation, I would ask? Where would we, where could we find the strength and the faith to carry on or would this all be lost in our isolation?

It is believed the psalmist wrote this while in exile in Babylon. His churches had been destroyed, his livelihood and culture had been taken away and he was living in a distant land. While mourning this reality, he reaches out for a solution. In times like these, perhaps especially in times like these, remember who we are, he writes, what we value, what we believe. It is these internal strengths that keep us going when our world tries to hold us down.

How do we sing to the Lord in a foreign land? How do we be the church when the church buildings are off limits and we cannot congregate in groups larger than five? How do we be in community amid our isolation.

The passage 'all things work for good for those who love the Lord' is sometimes difficult to understand but I do believe, in the hard times, in our struggles, goodness always rises to the top.

And so we sing of goodness in these days of Covid-19; the goodness of all those who are working to keep us safe and fed and healthy.

We sing of neighbours and friends who call, and text and reach out in a myriad of ways letting us know people care.

We sing of technology and people who know how to use it that allows us to see the faces of our loved ones whom we cannot visit and to see our faith family united through a series of little boxes each containing the smiles and faith of people we know and love.

We sing of musicians, past and present who lift our spirits and to all who share in our worship experiences

We sing of a God who is with us and a faith that sustains us.  
Yes, we are in a foreign land, and it is not always easy, but let us find something to sing about, because with such songs in our hearts, this too shall pass!!

Keep Safe

Overcoming Isolation: Our Virtual Chancel Choir - by Paul Currie  
2020/05/09

Liturgy can be lost, in isolation . . .or it can be found, in intentionality.

Our Sunday liturgy at Edith Rankin Memorial United Church in Kingston has always literally been the "Work of the People," and in this Covid-19 world, the people must work to innovate. We have seen some communities of faith move directly to live streaming worship. That is a good way to keep things going, but it may miss the mark when it comes to the feeling of sitting side by side in our pews - doing the work of the people.

Serving as a choir member, and being a pensioned pastor, I was glad to see our worship planning team, lead by the Rev. Dr. Bill Smith and the Rev. Joe Ramsay, move to regular online interactive worship using RingCentral Meetings (powered by Zoom). I quickly volunteered a time for us to continue weekly Choir Practice using the same platform. We tried singing online, but the cacophony of multiple mikes open, crashing and "Zooming" together was hard to take.

Still, we wanted to continue the weekly music ministry. We had seen the big choirs and orchestras making music over the internet - multiple boxes of singing heads or instruments in action. As a bit of techie too, I knew that I had recording and video software to work on meshing individual voices, but it just looked rather overwhelming.

One of our choir members suggested SoundTrap.com. This cloud based app returns liturgy to the people in a big way. Downloaded to our smartphone, PC or Mac computer, we listen to the piano accompaniment recorded by our music director Kim Barney and just sing along through our device's microphone. First time for me meant singing my bass line four or five times to get in synch, but then it became a lot of fun. The learning curve is softened because it is a completely collaborative process. (For instance, we learned that the best PC platform to use was Chrome, not Edge.)

Each musician involved is invited to join the project. They open the SoundTrap Studio on their device, and enter their part as one track on a many layered musical file. Once all tracks are recorded, their sounds are manually or automatically blended with volume, tone, and resonance controls. Parts can even be cut and pasted, duplicated, or shifted.

SoundTrap offers a robust free online service, and adds more bells and whistles for a small monthly fee. Even those are free for the first month. Our first project was a quintet for Good Friday. The finished music track was combined with lyrics and Lenten backgrounds as it was displayed on all our RingCentral meeting screens. It was a hit. The larger than normal Good Friday congregation heard familiar voices turning the service into a true work of the people. Some were seen in the RingCentral gallery view holding a tissue to their teary eyes. You can check out to what we have created over these past few weeks at [ermuc.ca](http://ermuc.ca). SoundTrap is turning out to be an effective, fun way to do the Work of the People in the midst of a pandemic.

For Everyman - by Rev. Joe Ramsay  
2020/05/20

I thought that this week I would share a meditation through music as well as words.

For Everyman was written by Jackson Browne in 1973 at the height of the Vietnam War and the Cold War. While many counter-culture artists were proclaiming an escapist vision of checking out of "the establishment" that seemed like it was teetering on the brink of apocalypse, Jackson offered this song of hope ... waiting for everyman, waiting for humanity to come to its senses and overcome the madness fuelling inequality, racism, violence, and environmental disaster (sound familiar?) This idea of humanity accounting for ourselves may be based on the 15th century morality play "The Summoning of Everyman" — long ago I heard someone say something 'bout everyman — but his lyrics are the perfect antidote to the despair some feel today when greed and power seem to trump the common good, health and democracy.

Can we, as people of faith, embody a gospel of hope and resilience? Can we, in Christ's name hold out "that strong but gentle Father's hand" in words of encouragement and acts of courage and compassion? I offer this cover as a tribute to the human spirit that will overcome these dark days, and to the brilliant talent of Jackson Browne.

The Woodshed Podcast - by Rev. Joe Ramsay  
2020/06/06

Recently, my friend and colleague Peter Woods asked me to be his first guest on a podcast they are producing in the congregation where he serves: MacKay United Church in Ottawa. The podcast is called "The Woodshed" in reference to a term used by musicians when they get together to work out new compositions where they won't be heard. MacKay's "woodshed" is a place to overhear Peter and guests working out new ideas, new thinking, new theology. Here is the podcast which you can listen to using the play button below.

Meditation - Venting is Normal by Paul Currie  
August 11, 2024

"I WONDER why she did it,"  
said the flower, reflectively.  
It spoke aloud without knowing it.  
The gardener's daughter heard it and  
smiled, for she knew what the flower  
meant.  
It had been carefully planted, watered,  
and cared for,  
but had somehow forgotten  
to hold up its head and breathe in the  
sunlight.  
Instead, it had drooped sadly,  
because....  
` its petals were less brightly colored than  
those of its neighbors,  
`or its foliage less beautiful than that of  
others,  
or because ...  
`it did not occupy the centre of the garden,  
or because ...  
-well, nobody but the gardener  
and his daughter  
can tell just what was the reason.  
It had drooped,  
and after a while  
even the sunlight appeared to have  
forgotten it.

A thicket of weeds grew up around it  
and almost choked the flower,  
taking a malicious delight  
in its discouragement.

Finally, the gardener's daughter  
remembered it.  
She went to it and cleared away the weeds,  
that the sun might reach it once more.

The surprised little flower tried to thank  
her, but only succeeded in asking,  
"Why?"  
How could she think it worthwhile?

it wondered.

Do you want to know why? "  
whispered the gardener's daughter.  
"Because flowers are God's thoughts.

I wanted to help you  
to grow strong and beautiful for God."

And the flower did not disappoint her.  
.....

Are not human souls,  
even more truly than flowers,  
" God's thoughts "?

It cannot be time wasted  
to help them grow;  
and one of the helps is  
the sunshine of intelligent sympathy  
and cheery companionship.

It is not for the young alone,  
not for the cultured and fortunate alone.

Every soul that ever-lived needs sunshine  
in order to grow into  
the bright and harmonious life  
that God intended for it.

Then only can it reach and bless  
other lives with a like helpfulness.

Farewell to the weeds  
of selfishness and despondency;  
it is time for the sun to shine in!  
Copyright, 1898,  
BY UNITED SOCIETY OF CHRISTIAN  
ENDEAVOR

....  
This passage introduces a book called  
"80 Pleasant Evenings" from 1898

that I found on my mom's book shelf  
this summer.

When I read it, I couldn't help but think  
of this time I had planned  
to spend with you today,  
in the beauty of this lakeshore flower  
garden.

Here, we find God's thoughts  
blooming all around.

Here, we take time to thank those  
whose dedication and green thumbs  
have brought all of these,  
'God's thoughts' .... to weed free beauty.

Now the Scripture tie in for me  
was the epistle for today.

Ephesians 4:25-5:2 New International  
Reader's Version  
... Speak the truth to your neighbor.  
We are all parts of one body.

Scripture says,  
"When you are angry, do not sin." (Psalm  
4:4)  
Do not let the sun go down  
while you are still angry.

Don't give the devil a chance. ...  
Don't let any evil talk  
come out of your mouths.

Say only what will help  
to build others up and meet their needs.

Then what you say  
will help those who listen.

Do not make God's Holy Spirit mourn. ...

Get rid of all hard feelings,  
anger and rage.  
Stop all fighting and lying.

Don't have anything to do with  
any kind of hatred.

Be kind and tender to one another.  
Forgive one another,  
just as God forgave you ....

Its so easy to leave  
the gardens of our life to themselves.

Time passes and we hardly notice  
the weeds of our mistakes  
crowding out the beauty of our soul.

Time passes  
and we get used to living in the dark,  
while the sunshine of life is always there,  
not far away.

Time passes  
and we begin to let depression and despair,  
anger and resentment,  
become our normal.

It gets hard to remember  
the joy of our faith  
and the light of our saving God.

But the passage today  
underlines for us that  
that kind of living  
is not what God intends.

Rather, it says that Venting is Normal.  
....

A few years back,  
Debbie and were on the 401  
and saw a transport truck ahead of us on  
fire.

It was just barreling along  
while smoke billowed out behind it.

Debbie got out her phone  
and may have called in a 911 emergency,

except that the smoke cleared  
for a brief moment,  
enough for us to read the sign  
on the back of the truck:

Venting is Normal.

We laughed, took a picture, and carried on.

Whatever the truck was carrying  
was producing a smoky like exhaust  
out of the roof of the transport.  
It may have been a load of dry ice,  
we don't know.

What we do know,  
is that venting is normal.

Normalizing that kind of behaviour  
is designed to help  
pull us out of the weeds  
of despair and destruction,  
despondency and denial.

So, as Paul instructed  
the Christian Community in Ephesus,  
this Paul reminds you again:  
Do not let the sun go down  
while you are still angry.  
Don't give the devil a chance. ...

I'm sure that there have been times  
when you have felt the weeds of anger  
boiling up around you  
and choking out the live giving rays  
of God's light.

Paul certainly had experience with that  
himself.

There was a time  
when people called him Saul,  
and he was well known  
for his ability to lead people  
to the correct way,  
the kosher way,

of living as a child of God.

For instance,  
when he saw what this  
little band of Jesus Followers was doing  
– the way they were leading  
his fellow Jews astray  
– he went after them with a fury.

And that fury eventually  
blinded him to the truth.....

And he learned how  
keeping that kind of fury and anger  
in his life  
began to destroy it.

God found him  
And temporarily blinded him  
on the road to Damascus  
– when he was about to let  
his fury be known  
against a group of Jesus Followers there  
– and Paul was forced  
to relent, to repent, to reform himself,  
and he started calling himself Paul.

Saul is a Hebrew name that means  
something like “chosen” or “asked for”  
– and Saul of the New Testament  
certainly lived a life of one  
whom God had chosen.

He was a brilliant student  
and an even better teacher.  
And he lived what he learned.

While Paul is a Greek name  
that means something like  
“small” or “humble.”

And despite the way St. Paul  
continued to lead  
from his knowledge  
and teach from his understanding,  
- after that famous life altering

Damascus Road experience,  
he did it from the place of humility.

So, he could remind that Ephesians,  
and us gathered among the flowers  
of God's thoughts here today,  
that Venting is Normal.

And more than that,  
that Venting is required

- Do Not Let the Sun Set on Your Anger.
- Don't let evil get a hold of your heart.

Venting means finding a good listener  
and talking your troubles away  
- before they gain enough of a hold  
to take you away on a life sucking tangent.

Venting like that is  
not always easy - but always worthwhile.  
....

There was a time when St. Paul  
lived a life like Jack Nicholson's character  
in the movie, A Few Good Men.

Paul guarded the wall  
between the Way of God  
and the Way of Destruction.

Remember the Colonel's famous movie  
line:

You can't handle the truth.  
Col. Jessup went on to tell Kaffee,  
the Tom Cruise character:  
Son, we live in a world that has walls,  
and those walls have to be guarded  
by men with guns.

Of course, the colonel's Venting in this case  
only led to a stint in the slammer.

It reminds me of the younger St Paul when  
his name was still Saul.

And I could very well imagine  
the Saul of the New Testament  
sharing the same sentiment  
as Jack Nicholson's character  
as Saul was about to do away with  
the upstart Jesus Followers  
in favour of his militant, Pharisaical,  
approach to faith and life.

But there's another famous line:  
The truth shall set you free

The Gospel of John (8) tells us  
of a time when Saul's group  
- the Pharisees  
- were arguing with Jesus.

But the more people heard Jesus  
talk about our relationship  
with each other and with the Son of God,  
the more they figured Jesus was right,  
and the Pharisees - and Saul - were wrong.

Even while Jesus was speaking,  
many people believed in him.

I am the Light of the world.  
Whoever follows me  
will never walk in darkness,  
But will have the light of life.

"If you obey my teaching," he said,  
"you are really my disciples.

Then you will know the truth.  
And the truth will set you free.

The truth is that  
Wherever you are  
You are on  
God's mind.

As we hear in Jeremiah 29:11  
For surely I know the thoughts I have for  
you,  
Says the Lord,

Thoughts for your welfare and not for harm  
To give you a future with HOPE.

....

Yes, the beautifully born flower had  
drooped,  
and after a while  
even the sunlight  
appeared to have forgotten it.

A thicket of weeds grew up around it  
and almost choked the flower,  
taking a malicious delight  
in its discouragement.

Finally, the gardener's daughter  
remembered it.  
She went to it and cleared away the weeds,  
that the LIGHT might reach it once more.

The surprised little flower  
tried to thank her,  
but only succeeded in asking,  
"Why?"  
How could she think it worth while?  
it wondered.  
Do you want to know why?"  
whispered the gardener's daughter.

"Because flowers are God's thoughts.

I wanted to help you  
to grow strong and beautiful for God."  
And the flower did not disappoint her.

So, our homework  
as we leave this lakeside garden today,  
is to do a little weeding.

Its to make some changes in our life,  
and in the lives of those close to us  
in community or family,  
so that the light of the world  
will shine brightly in our midst.

Those changes will help bring  
God's thoughts  
up front where they belong.

So, yes, may the words of my mouth,  
and the meditations of our hearts, ...  
be acceptable unto God,  
who is our redeemer. Amen.

