

## **“How Can We See a Unity of the Spirit in our Fractious World?”**

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of  
St. Andrew’s United Church  
for Sunday, May 8, 2016 – Easter 7, or Mother’s Day  
Scripture Readings: Acts 16:16-24; John 17:20-26  
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

We never need to look far to discover reasons for a sense of sadness and fear, especially uncertainty, in the world each new day.

Long before the city of Fort McMurray was virtually destroyed by raging forest fires, we could pick up a newspaper, read a newsmagazine, watch a television newscast or listen to an update on the radio and we would have reason to feel uncertain, even despair, about the future.

It is interesting that where once religious writings would focus on the power of sin and call people into right relationships with God, more and more the message of religious leaders is addressing the modern angst, or worry, or uncertainty of daily life, and the need we all have to find reasons to live in hope in the midst of despair.

Some see confusion and uncertainty as a reality, even a necessity, in life.

Oswald Chambers, a contributor to *Christian Post*, states, “It is only by going through the confusion that you will get at what God wants.”

Christian rapper Flame (yes, there are Christian rappers) suggests that the death of cultural Christianity will help the spread of the gospel, for “God can still use us to be a blessing to others even when we are burdened by our own troubles.”

George Orwell, author of such controversial books as **Animal Farm** and **1984**, books that deal with the total control of others, has stated, “The further a society drifts from the truth, the more it will hate those who speak it.”

Some see that hope in the traditions of the faith. In a blog from the United Church of God:

“In a world hopelessly divided and confused, you can cut through the clutter by going to the one source that reveals the way to find God – the Bible. Believe, live by it, and you can discover God.”

That may sound wonderful and clear, yet the very readings from today hardly give us a sense of immediate hope and assurance. As one person said, “This is hardly a passage that resonates with a Mother’s Day message.”

Jesus asks God to remember the disciples – they may not understand fully all that Jesus taught, or even be clear about the role of God in the world, but at least they have known Jesus, and on the basis of that connection, Jesus says they deserve to be treated as people of faith, loyal to God, blessed within the world.

Now that may be reassuring to followers of Jesus in the first century, but what of those who did not have the advantage of knowing Jesus? Indeed, there can be a sense in the Bible where goodness is weighted for the insiders. Insider trading may be unlawful on the stock market, but why is insider trading of the spiritual gifts accepted in the Bible?

Surely that was not the intention of Jesus. He knew the world was a challenging place, and people face uncertainty and hardship. He wanted to make sure people felt supported and cared for by God.

That was the extent of his teaching.

And the reading from Acts, where issues of spiritual divination are raised, seems to be more judgment than we want to accept today. In the face of these readings and attitudes, it is important to ask:

“How can we help people feel whole and heard?”

People across Canada are responding to the crisis in Fort McMurray through many types of gifts, prayers, thoughts, messages.

We can respond through the Red Cross, or help congregations that are doing their bit to house and support people on their doorsteps through the Alberta and Northwest Conference office.

People facing such a crisis need our encouragement because without it they may become too discouraged to carry on. We have learned that crises rise up quickly. A forest fire can double in size in less than 48 hours. Three years ago the World Council of Churches held a meeting in Beirut on how Christians could be supported in war-torn Syria, especially in such fragile areas as Aleppo, the largest city in Syria and a city of historic and architectural importance. Quickly all people of faith were threatened in that city, and destruction has been rampant over the ensuing years.

In all such disasters – from fire, from hurricanes or tornadoes or earthquakes, from warfare – discouragement and uncertainty are the strongest threats to spiritual hope that we may ever face.

Children, youth and young adults of Attawapiskat continue to face the threat of suicide as they live in what appears to be a hopeless environment. People from the Chief, the Prime Minister, and the local Member of Parliament are anguished by the reality there. How can hope be discovered anew?

A group of young musicians are trying their best to have an impact on their communities, including Attawapiskat.

Adrian Sutherland, lead singer for the band Midnight Shine, a group of musicians who live along the southern shores of James Bay (Sutherland himself is from Attawapiskat; the rest from neighbouring communities including Moose Factory), sees the role of the band and their music is to offer hope to aboriginal young people. To sing and live without engaging the crisis of the soul many aboriginal youth face would be careless and

thoughtless. Young people need hope, and music can provide that in many instances.

Matt Walker, writing a year ago in *Psychology Today*, speaks to the challenges we face in an interesting way:

“Adventure is defined by uncertain outcome. The most significant events in our life, the most important decisions and the most meaningful choices, are characterized in part by uncertainty and by fear. Without uncertainty we have a safe, contained and predictable experience, we don’t have adventure.”

Fear, Walker goes on to say, is about facing that sense of adventure and looking for ways to conquer the situation; terror is when we doubt ourselves and believe there is no hope ahead.

Our effective role in life is not to turn fear into terror.

As people of faith, we also have a role to help those facing terror to manage it by providing hope, so that terror may revert to fear, but a fear that can be conquered.

Many of us may fear the future; with the help of others, may we never be terrorized by what surrounds us and controls us.

That is a message worth holding up for all time.