

“Here is some good news we just have to tell you!”

A sermon shared by the 2016-2017 confirmation class: David Battaino Barber, Lachlan Duncanson-Hales, and Brennan Maag,

with leaders Nissah Sleik, Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman, and Rev. Catherine Somerville

Sunday June 11, 2017

(92nd birthday of The United Church of Canada)

Scriptures: Psalm 8; Matthew 28: 16-20

Catherine: There were eleven people in the congregation that day. Down from twelve the last time they had gathered. And if those eleven had been asked what they were thinking about at that moment, most likely they would have said they were wondering where the nearest exit was located.

They were fearful, filled with doubts and questions.

Into this mix, Jesus comes among them, and tells them what they are to do. Go and make disciples. Go and make disciples of foreigners, no less. They were to go to the Gentiles. Go, and tell the foreigners about the broadness of Godly love. Tell them that they belong; they have a place. They are part of the family. Tell them I'll be with them always. Tell them that their experience of God will be new and will break every boundary they currently have in their living.

Tell them that their lives will be transformed.

Now, telling all of this to that congregation of eleven lost and confused souls, would be like hearing me stand up and say to you, “Go out there and cure cancer. Clean up the environment, make sure all the hungry children in the world have food in their tummies tonight, and while you're at it, figure out how to establish world peace.”

And that is exactly the point of this portion of the gospel story we just heard. The very fact that the task is impossible reminds the disciples that they are going to have to rely on the mercy and strength of God.

The work and witness of the church doesn't come from our resources, no matter how little or how much we put in. It doesn't come from our brightest ideas or our latest mission initiatives. It doesn't come from inspiring worship or mind-blowing Bible Study or the best pastoral care and outreach ever seen. The work of the church begins when we realize that our calling is to honour God.

It's about us learning to lean our lives on some incredible promises, like remembering that Jesus told his followers that they would not be alone, that he would be with us always, to the end of the age. It is a gift of Jesus, given for us, and he tells the people of his willingness to be present always to the church through the spirit.

The miracle is that each of us carries a piece of that sacred story. In a poem, Keri Wehlander offers this insight:

“We are witnesses and storytellers, we are part of the unfolding tale of faith. Precious words and sacred memories are carried by every one of us.

If we ‘Go and tell what we have seen and heard’ each one can recite a chapter, a verse, a paragraph.

And when we risk spinning these yarns, when we listen, when we speak, when we carefully gather all the fragments up, we discover that there is good news all over again.”

(Joy is our Banquet, Resources for Everyday Worship, 1996, p.16)

Today, our confirmation class is going to tell you a few pieces of the good news story we have been given. At the last class that was held this week, we reviewed our year together, and we had good conversations, as we worked to answer four questions.

The first question is one that David and I are going to answer. The question is: “How do you experience God’s presence in your life?”

David: For me it is Love.

Catherine: Who are the people in your life that remind you that you are loved?

David: My parents and grandparents, and my brother.

Catherine: Even your brother? That is great. Some people tell you they love you all the time. Do your parents tell you they love you all the time?

David: Yes, they do.

Catherine: But some people show you they love you. What special things does your family do to remind you that they love you?

David: My dad drives me and my friends to soccer – we play games together, go camping, and have holidays as a family.

Catherine: Thanks David. Your answers remind me that many of us come to know about God through our relationships. There are people who speak to us in loving, kind ways. There are people that do amazing things in the world, which help to make life better. There are people who remind us how important it is to say thank you, and invite to be grateful. There are lots of people who share their joy, and those relationships teach us that God loves us, completely and generously. Thank you for telling us about that piece of the good news story, David.

In one of the confirmation lessons, we talked about how the Bible is really a love letter, filled with messages of love from God to the world. We experience God’s presence in our lives by knowing love, by giving and receiving love.

The second question is one that Bill decided to try and answer: What will you remember most about your confirmation journey?

Bill: Well, remembering my own confirmation journey, I remember being with a class of people 5-6 years younger than I was, much younger than our group here, and I felt most of them did not take the process seriously enough. This class at St. Andrew's was both serious and committed in their approach, but also enthusiastic and fun-loving in their eagerness to comment and ask questions. I always say there are never any bad questions, and there weren't, and I hope these participants never received any bad answers from us.

But I also will remember this year the comments of many in the congregation after Catherine and I would leave to attend the classes. Nissah does an excellent job in being the lead teacher in the process, but as ministers we wanted to find time to connect with the class, even though (for family and personal reasons) the best time for the classes was during the Sunday worship service time itself. So, as you may remember, Catherine or I would leave the service a couple of times a month to spend significant time with the class. With ice storms and snowstorms, cold and flu season messing up our meeting schedule, we sometimes had a challenge to make these collective commitments. One week Sylvia kindly agreed to lead the end of the service on a week Catherine had planned her monthly absence so that I could be part of the class time.

At least six or seven people stopped me at coffee hour that day- some started with the comment: "I want to say something to you about you and Catherine leaving the service to attend the confirmation class."

"Oh, oh," I thought, "this may be an expression of dismay that we are not fulfilling our responsibilities as worship leaders."

Far from it. As one person put it, echoed by the others' comments, "I think it is wonderful that you both are making time to be a part of these classes, and I know the congregation is excited by your commitment to support our youth in this way. Thank you."

So I will remember confirmation as being an intensive experience among the participants and Nissah, but we as ministers and the whole congregation felt a part of their journey, too. We all had a role to play, and support to offer. So thanks go to the participants, and thanks also go to you as members and friends within the congregation.

Catherine: Your words remind me, Bill, of how much we learn from one another. The very first lesson we did together, reminded us that we are not alone. People will cross our paths, and they will encourage us and they will challenge our beliefs so that we can grow. I know that my faith grew this year through our time in confirmation. Thank you, Bill, for that piece of the good news story that you told us about.

The third question: What is one thing you have learned this year that you want to share? Lachlan, Brennan, and Nissah are going to tackle this one.

Lachlan: Being open to other ideas/ listening and learning from what others have to say.

Catherine: What have you learned about other people's ideas/opinions?

Lachlan: I learned to listen to others, and hear their perspectives. I came here with some uncertainty about my faith and I found friends and fellow travellers within the church here.

Catherine: Lachlan, that's a good reminder of another one of our lessons. Jesus told us to love, with heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbour as you love yourself. Learning and listening from others is a big piece of that teaching. Thank you, Lachlan, for giving us that piece of good news.

Brennan: I like to think of respect for all of life (people, trees). We are to care for creation, and we must do that in the midst of global warning and concern about the environment.

Catherine: In one of our lessons, we talked about the words in our creed, "to live with respect in creation," and we focused on the words in Psalm 19, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." We talked about how creation is abused, and we also shared some good news stories about how people are making a difference, and respecting creation. Thanks for that piece of the good news story, Brennan.

Nissah: Much can happen, and learning takes place, when we listen to one another. One of the lessons that was most powerful for the group was to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

Catherine: Thank you for that piece of good news, that reminder to treat our neighbours with respect and love as we would want to be treated.

The final question is one all six of us are going to answer: What good news do you have to share?

David: God is with you every step of the way.

Lachlan: We have friends, we make community (e.g., Manitou Youth Forum).

Brennan: Life is getting better every day. We are growing in our faith, and it helps to be positive and to see goodness all around us.

Catherine: And Brennan also was excited that he gets to vote at church meetings!

Nissah: When we have good conversations, we can build a better community.

Bill: The good news I want to share is good news that I shared at Manitou Conference last Saturday evening during the President's banquet. I think we often place on people immense expectations as to how they are to live their faith.

For example, we hear stories of some of the great teachers and prophets of the faith, and then we tell people to "go and do likewise."

Well, we are not all comfortable at being speakers or orators or outspoken prophets, and the truth is most prophets also were not equipped from the beginning for the role God was calling them to fulfill. Read the Old Testament – most prophets were reluctant prophets, and only could fulfill that role (or any other teaching, preaching, leading, supporting, encouraging role) thanks to being clear that God was the source of their support.

So the good news is God is there to support us in life, and we need never feel alone or abandoned. Moreover, we should feel good about the role God has for us, because they are all important as we seek to live our faith, and to help and encourage our neighbours, families, and friends.

And, as Jesus taught, and Nissah and others underlined earlier, if ever in doubt as to what your role is, love your neighbours.

Catherine: I am reminded of the adage, "Yes we can!" We each have a piece of the sacred story to share with the world. It's like that poem I read at the beginning: If we go and tell what we have seen and heard, each one can recite a chapter, a verse, a paragraph. When we risk speaking our truth, when we listen deeply to the truths others have to share, then we gather all these fragments up, and we discover the good news all over again.