

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Shared service at St. John the Divine Anglican Church

October 21, 2018

Scriptures:

Job 38:1-7

Mark 10:35-45

Drinking From the Cup

Whenever I read anything from Job I flash back to a moment when I was sitting with a professor at university and she said to me “Do you ever feel like Job?” It was a dark time in my life from which I learned an immense amount. In my third year of University I was bed ridden from time to time from debilitating pain. In the summer I had a bike accident that resulted in a significant back and head injury. I heard more than one doctor say “You should not have made it out alive.” I dealt with a horrific concussion, amnesia and a twisted spine. It altered my personality and made studies very difficult. I was advised to quit school but I recall worrying I would end up depressed and so I chose lower grades over pulling out all together. This all happened shortly after I had been excommunicated by my childhood church family for reasons that I won't get into now but I can tell you I would have done the same if I were to be faced with this situation again today. Losing my church meant losing a community of faith I had grown up with and had known all my life. My parents were asked to disown me and to their credit they chose me over the church and for that I will be forever grateful. I was receiving hate mail, I was having hallucinations from episodes of pain and pain drugs and I was trying really hard to be a good student. My life-long dream to be a paramedic was shattered by the accident and I didn't know where to turn. I was mad at God, I was mad at people, and I hated myself for not coping with it all a whole lot better.

As many of you will know life carries on and that season is now a distant memory but the fact that I ever came back to faith and church is still a bit shocking to me. I came back to a very different faith than I had previously experienced and encountered though. Like Job I was forced to accept I was not in control of anyone or anything else, not even myself really. I came to realize that people who used their faith or position of authority to power over and dictate others lives were destructive and the damage they caused others could be life-long. I also discovered the Jesus I knew didn't support that so I wasn't going to either. I turned my focus to lifting up people in need and received along with my history degree a degree in social services. I focused on world religions and culture changes that impacted society. Martin Luther King Jr. became my hero along with Gandhi and Mother Teresa and I hoped that I could learn from them in such a way that my life and faith would be changed for the better.

It seems to me our world is struggling once again to rediscover what it means to be in power. World leaders are fighting to keep their place of honour by ridiculing others and kicking people when they are down. Issues of women's rights, race, culture and religion are back in the fore

front of media conversations in a way they have not been for a long time. In a way that shocks me out of my easy life bubble actually. Although this is really painful and disheartening today my hope is that this destructive display of power will remind us of what is really important and take people back to the core and the roots of their faith and being. This isn't a new struggle. It's exactly what James and John were struggling with in our gospel passage today.

The truth is though if we are following the Jesus way, if we look back to the beginning of the church the best leaders are those who lift up and serve one another. This Jesus' whole message and purpose. The early church shared and assisted one another to the point no one was in need. How do Christians support leadership that does anything but this. Christians are called to hospitality, to giving. Submission to one another, not out of weakness but as a mark of love and concern for one another. We spent the entire season of lent last year at Squamish United talking about and many of us practiced loving our neighbours, caring for our neighbours, getting to know our neighbours not for something in return but because that is what we are called to do as followers of Jesus. Not in just some hypothetical be kind to the universe kind of way but in the way that we actually know one another In the way that happened for me this weekend when I learned my neighbour has hurt her back and cant hardly move and so I offer to take her daughter for the day (even though she kind of exhausts us). Or even like Judy who organized a whole block party for her neighbours so they could get to know each other.

James and John missed this piece of the message when they journeyed with Jesus, or more likely they forgot it along the way. They presume their friendship and respect for him comes with a reward, and they want to lock it in while things are going well. So, they requested to sit at the side of Jesus in glory. As usual Jesus' response is to use their request as a teaching moment: "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." (Mark 10:38-40 *NRSV*)

Job and James and John are looking at things the way humans often do. They see God as someone to be placated either through worship, obedience or dedication, but they expect some kind of special recognition in return. In Job's case, he gets unmitigated suffering and loss. James and John are also warned that the cup of suffering will be theirs. So why would we follow? Why would we do this Jesus thing?

Many of us do. I know I've embraced the God of the whirlwind and at times I do feel like it comes with the cup of suffering. Not like for Jesus or even as badly as many others but I at least know what it feels like to be judged for being a Christian. I know that feeling of wanting to stand up against someone and choose grace and love instead and I know it is not always easy. I know what it is to get looked at sideways just because I follow Jesus.

Last weekend amidst everything else I was taking a course on Bowen island. It is a small collective so I had to explain my absence for Saturday afternoon. When I said I was going to officiate a funeral of a friend I then explained I am a minister. Later that night at dinner one of my classmates leaned back and said “so... you’re a minister, like a pastor.” I felt the whole table go silent. “Of what church?” “The United Church” I replied. “What’s that” he said... there was no question that there was judgment in his tone. “Oh it’s the good church” someone else piped up. “What does that mean?” He said. “Their progressive” said another. I felt anxiety rise within me. I explained to this American that we were part of the methodist tradition. We talked I tried to not defend but just state who I was a bit. It turns out his father is an old school Southern Baptist pastor and not a very nice man. I found myself stating over and over and over. I understand why people, especially Americans these days question Christianity and feel it is abusive and hurtful. I tried to say I don’t understand how Christians can believe that power or abuse or misogyny or racism or anything against another is what God calls us to. I do not get it, other than it is human nature. We feel like we should be over an above the other and we have a right to put down another. In our culture you can’t win you are criticized if you are powerful or have any sort of leadership role and you are looked down on by many if you don’t. These qualities are the opposite of what Jesus was calling us to.

That is why its leaders like Desmond Tutu that I look up to. As one who could have simply held the positions of Bishop of Johannesburg and then Archbishop of Capetown with status and privilege. Instead he used those offices and his Nobel Prize to challenge the evil of apartheid, risking his own life because he knew, loved and served a God who was above and beyond all earthly powers.

It is not that God wants us to suffer, drinking the cup of Jesus isn’t meant to be suffering in itself. If all of us in our humanity would live as Jesus calls us to we wouldn’t have to face the kind of suffering or persecution many do for standing up for the underdog. This week a group of UCC, Anglican, Lutheran and clergy few other denominations wrote a letter to Rob Fleming the Minister of Education in support of the SOGI123 educational resource. If you are not aware of the SOGI 1 2 3 resource its stated purpose is to help educators make schools inclusive and safe for students of all sexual orientations and gender identities (SOGI). You have likely seen in the media that there are Christians protesting this resource and education.

We decided we needed to voice our side of the story. Our letter stated “We recognize that there is a diversity of viewpoints in the Christian community, and that one can be faithful, Biblically-based, and Christ-centred without coming to the same conclusions as those found in the Accord. With a deep grounding in Scripture we come to different conclusions.

We represent many Christian denominations that worship, form community, serve neighbourhoods, and work for justice. Each of our denominations has its own unique history, traditions, and practices, and there is much diversity of thought, experience, and opinion within and between each denomination. That said, together we affirm the following:

Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, and a great diversity is reflected in that image, including a wide spectrum of unique sexualities sexual orientations and gender identities. We believe that this is a reflection of the magnitude of God's creative work.

We stand in solidarity with LGBTQ2SIA+ people and we are committed to their recognition as fully participating members of our society, respected and honoured, with their human rights affirmed and protected.

In the gospel of Mark (9:36-37 NRSV) "Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Jesus cut across the barriers that separated people, and particularly drew people to him that were marginalized and powerless (women, children, the poor, ethnic minorities, religious "others," etc). The first communities of Jesus' followers struggled to live out the inclusive community that Jesus had called for, and we still strive for this today. When Jesus tells us to love our neighbour, that means all our neighbours. We are always called to reach out to those on the margins and give them a place of welcome, safety and belonging.

Sometimes we are called upon to stand in the face of injustice.

Even more so in our homes and in our neighbourhoods. How do we show up as Jesus people? Its not always easy and it doesn't necessarily come with the perks I was taught it would. I've learned I can follow God and Jesus and be kind and serve others and there is no guarantee I won't get cancer, or I won't have a house fire, or people will like me, or I will succeed - whatever that means.

You all have examples of people in your life who have served without expectation. Who have loved for the sake of loving. I try hard and sometimes I get it right but sometimes it gets hard and people take advantage but I try to remember it's not about me - it's about love. I invite all of us to consider people, places, events in our lives that we could show up and offer the kind of love Jesus offers us. You will be blessed to be a blessing God said to Abram.

No life isn't always easy, and yet I've also discovered when I live in gratitude for all the God has given me I am also more likely to offer more love and grace to others.

May we so live.