

GOD'S WILLINGNESS TO RISK

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On this last Sunday of July, our readings of the day which are being read throughout most of our churches, speak of God's great capacity for love and forgiveness. The overall theme it appears to me is God's willingness to risk in God's relationship with us all.

Last week, we read from the writings of the prophet Amos where he indicated to the people of his day that God's patience with the Israelites as the chosen people had come to an end. Amos warns that no one should assume God's patience and love is without limit particularly when God receives nothing back from those for whom God cares.

Making matters even more serious Amos goes on to say is God's weariness with the rituals and worship carried on without any feeling of true worship. People just wanted to ensure that God was aware of their needs and desire for whatever they now wanted to make sure they have more of everything. Greed and self interest had become foremost and Amos warned that God was tired of this attitude and the sham of their worship. Where was their gratitude for the gifts of God, their very life, their family and their community? Where was their sheer joy in God's loyalty and tolerance? When is enough enough?

The Book of Amos is an important reminder to all of us that we should not presume on a God we neglect for most of our lives. Having said that, Amos reminds the people we are here because God saw fit to create us, to love and nourish us and to be in relationship with God. Repent Amos shouted for God will hear you and will reestablish an intimate relationship if you seek to change. It goes back to the ancient Creation story in the book of Genesis. In our VBS we are meeting seven Wednesday nights on the theme of the Seven Days of Creation. Whatever the reality of how the earth was shaped and human life appeared, this story is critical for us as it shows vividly that it was not just an accident. A greater power than ourselves created the world as we know it and did so with intention, excitement and saw that it was good.

Like all the prophets, Amos believed God created the world for the purpose of relationship with this creation. Why do we forget and neglect God so easily he asks; do we not have any memory at all? Are we all that self-centred?

Our Psalm reading this morning was a reminder to us and the people of years ago of the wonder of God's love and God's intentional interest in each of us. In the 85th Psalm, the psalmist proclaims God's willingness to move back from the brink of anger and disgust in spite of God's annoyance and disappointment. The psalmist believes and proclaims that God is always willing to risk and begin a new relationship with the one who has gone astray.

The psalmist proclaims: "Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation towards us! Will you be angry with us forever? Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?"

This theme of God's willingness to continually renew our covenant together is great news and forms the basis of our belief in Jesus Christ. Jesus for us and all Christian believers was the great gift of God and the ultimate sign of God's great regard and love for all creation. If God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten Son, then the question is answered as to whether or not God loves us continually in spite of our shortcomings, our short memory and our inability to be thankful for what we have and are.

Before we leave our psalmist, let us hear his final words which describe attributes of our God. It is a wonderful part of scripture.

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky. Yea, the Lord will give what is good.” Once again we see the wonderful concept we saw in the creation story, that God sees goodness in all creation even if we can not see it for ourselves.

Our second reading was St. Luke's recording of our Lord Jesus Christ's session with his disciples around the theme of prayer, how to pray and what we can expect from God when we pray. In response to the request to teach them how to pray, Jesus gave the disciples what we now call The Lord's Prayer. Is it not an amazing thing to understand that every second of everyday for 2000 years, in a multitude of languages, someone is repeating this prayer in heartfelt supplication to the Creator God.

In this brief prayer, we acknowledge the holy name of God and God's sovereignty over all creation. We ask that God's kingdom will come and that God's will be done everywhere. Then we ask for the necessities of life such as bread. Then we ask for forgiveness of God for all our sins, shortcomings and our hurtful acts towards others. You note Jesus then joins our request for forgiveness with a clear acknowledgment that if we need forgiveness and request it from God, then we need to be willing and able to offer forgiveness to others and ourselves. Then we ask God to give us strength to resist the many temptations which tempt us each day of our life, for we acknowledge we can not do it on our own.

Jesus goes on to speak of what is a fair expectation by us of God's response to our prayers. He asks a question as to how we would respond to a friend's request though late at night for a favour. Would we be abusive, ask a million questions and then begrudge doing anything to help? Or would we be only too happy to assist a friend in need. So Jesus asks, if we are capable of love and assistance, why should we not expect even more from God who loves us and gave us life itself.

Then Jesus utters these well known and beloved words. “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you.” Jesus then goes on:

“For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him or her who knocks it will be opened.” But Jesus does not end there with the words of hope he has given re: God’s response to our prayers. He then asks what father being asked for a fish will give him a serpent or if he asks for an egg will give him a scorpion? As people around him shook their heads in agreement with Jesus as how one treats family and friends, Jesus concludes with these wonderful words of assurance: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

So there we are. Verses from the Old Testament and the New Testament; words by prophets, psalmists and Jesus himself. Each of them proclaim God’s deep and abiding interest in each one of God’s creation, God’s willingness to be open to prayer and free to respond with forgiveness and peace. We need to monitor our motives as we pray to God for something for ourselves or others and we can never prejudge God’s response. We do know however that God is there and our prayers are not going into thin air.

I have always found it comforting that people 4000 years ago had the same questions we have today. Is God really there? Does God listen to my pleas? Is it worth trying to live a good life and what is that good life? How can we worship and what form should it take?

Jesus assures us of the importance of worship of God.

Let us note that the Lord’s Prayer is one of the few things Jesus gave as examples of how we should do things. If you want to know the key elements of prayer, here is an example. Who is the most important among you? Let he or she be a servant of all.

This congregation which has experienced so many things including amalgamation is about to embark on new changes. We heard today we will be searching for a new music director who is our minister of music. Many will assist us while we search. Our new minister begins here August 16th. We heard today she and her husband have bought a home within easy walking distance of the church. This week she will be moving her library into the minister’s office to avoid a double move in August. Times they are a changin’ at St. Matthew’s as the old song goes and it will be exciting if we get involved and join in and embrace the change.

Reading the Old and New Testaments or being a student of history helps us to view positively the inevitability of change. Yet in all of these centuries though time there has been one constant other than change itself. This constant has been and is God the Creator and sustainer of life, Jesus Christ the Son and the Holy Spirit which abides with us always through time and infinity.

Change is inevitable everyday of our life. It is perhaps the one constant we have. We can view ourselves as its victim and set about moaning and groaning, or we can view it as a new adventure with new possibilities opening up for us.

When I retired officially a few years ago, I began the adventure of taking on leadership in congregations where their beloved minister had left. How do I begin, how will I remember everyone, will my ministry be helpful and enable people to move on. In this church I was following a dynamic young man who has great preaching skills and was able to identify with all age groups.

The learning in all this over the years for me has been to be yourself, to not be what you are not and to share the things that you have discovered through your journey of faith, a journey not without bumps for any of us. By opening up to others, we discover the richness of faith in God experienced by others. What a blessing, what a privilege!

And so, we are all on a daily adventure with family and friends, colleagues, neighbours and the strangers we meet. I moved into the Quinte area seven years ago this August 1st not knowing anyone but the real estate person who sold me my home and my sister in Brighton. By venturing forth and offering myself in ministry at Bridge Street United Wellington United, Friendship and Wesley United and now St. Matthew's, I have had the privilege of knowing hundreds here and have been a part of the lives of many in very key and critical times in their lives.

So even retirement does not mean the end of things but the opening of new doors and adventures. The God we love, trust and worship is always with us as we have heard from others and have learned for ourselves.

That is why I am excited for St. Matthew's Church as a congregation and as a people. For if God be with you, who can stand against you? The future lies ahead and we each need to anticipate it and be open to participating in the surprise God has for us as a community of faith.

Amen.