

2023.02.12 Sermon 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany ©Gyllian Davies†

Years back, I belonged to a large church with several excellent preachers (this was long before I was a priest). One Sunday I was out of town and when I got back I asked my friend, Bob, who I knew had been there: “Who preached on Sunday? Was it a good one? What’d I miss?” He told me, “Our preacher was Shirley.” He paused. Shirley. I knew from personal and painful experience, Shirley was a compulsive talker. “Huh. How was it?” “Well,” he said, “She preached a really excellent sermon.” Surprised I said “Cool!” But then Bob continued., “And then she preached another one. And another one...” You get the idea!

Yesterday I wrote one sermon in the morning. Then in the afternoon at Jim Holland’s induction as the new incumbent of St Peter’s Quamichan I heard our bishop preach a really powerful sermon on the future of our church, our diocese. And I decided to share some of her thoughts and my responses to her thoughts with you. But the first sermon was really good too... Sooo I decided to preach both of them to you! But don’t worry – you’ll hardly notice that it’s two sermons long.

Bishop Anna talked about how our Diocese, research reveals, is the least religious diocese in all of North America. That is, when the general public are asked to define themselves, up to 60% in Nanaimo for example, describe themselves as non-religious. So that begs the question: who are we called to be? If we’re surrounded by people who do not ground their life in any faith, are we asked to focus on that? Nope. That is not what Christ asks us to do. What Jesus wants us to do is carry on his work in the world. What did he do? He made friends with the outcasts and invited them to eat with him. He restored sight for the blind, healed the lepers, the lame, and the chronically ill. Fundamentally he looked for the people who were hurting, wounded, marginalized. And then he invited them in, fed them dinner, listened to them, and gave them hope. And he tells us to do the same.

Nowhere did Jesus tell us to bring in families with young children to worship with us. That was not his concern. As Bishop Anna commented, everywhere she goes in this diocese she hears people lamenting how we don’t have families with young children. if only we could bring in families with young children... Right? Sound familiar? How many of you have had that thought? But what does that have to do with what Jesus asks of us? It’s a bit of a disconnect isn’t it? I think we get tangled up in nostalgia for the past and confuse that with how to be a healthy, vibrant, loving church today. Feed my sheep. That’s what Jesus told us to do. And you can’t get much more explicit than that. However, you can certainly get nuanced.

There’s another one I hear a lot: “We’re an aging congregation.” Did Jesus ask us to focus on how old our members are? Did he say, ignore the young people among you? focus on lack and scarcity? Wasn’t he the one who fed five thousand people with 5 loaves of bread and a few fish? Wasn’t he the one who turned water into wine. An abundance of wine? And isn’t God’s love about radical generosity? Okay, that was Part One.

Part Two: There's a lot of rules and laws in this morning's readings, aren't there. But really what it comes down to is that specifics matter. And so does our thinking. If we want to be a people of generosity, of kindness, of healing and inclusiveness. If we want to weave a bigger and bigger web of love, respect, mercy and justice, and include more and more people in it all the time... then we need to have thoughts that align with God's love. We all know it comes down to the one basic law, rule, commandment – love God and love one another. And loving God, if we stop and think about it, think about what it means to love God... I think it means to love goodness, kindness, wisdom... It also means we will love everything that God loves. Which is all that is. God loves all that God created. God loves vulnerability. God loves us, *especially* when we're broken or wounded; God loves us when we're petty. Imagine! God loves us when we're tired and grumpy and short-tempered, maybe snapping at the ones we love and sometimes the ones we don't love too. So to love God is to love all that God loves. All of Creation – which God calls good. And then we get the reminder to love one another too because that's what God does – loves us one and all, flawed, imperfect, fundamentally human. And please remember that loving one another includes loving ourselves. Because if we can't love ourselves how can we possibly hope to love another?

This is actually a very nuanced directive Jesus is giving to the people back then, sitting in the grass, and to us right here, right now sitting in this church. Jesus says - it's not just about what you do, about outward appearances. It's about what's on the inside of you, it's about your thoughts, your feelings, your mind and heart and soul. And we know what he means, don't we. We've all had the experience of moving through our lives with prickly thoughts or feelings going on inside us. We've all had times when we've been thinking mean thoughts or angry thoughts or self-righteous thoughts... there are so many thoughts we can have that aren't exactly about love. But then what happens is this – some time when we're really tired or not paying attention or stressed out about our lives...those mean thoughts get voiced. Or they get acted on. We hear ourselves saying some of those thoughts out loud. And it's just so easy when we're tired or feeling unloved and boom – out comes these parts of ourselves and we might end up groaning to ourselves “Oh God, what did I just say!” or “What did I just do!” And there we are, thinking “Oh my God, I can't believe I said that!” and asking ourselves “How can I undo that?” knowing full well it's not so easy BECAUSE when those thoughts are voiced we break the fragile web of trust we have woven between ourselves. ARGH. What we really want to be doing is reinforcing the webs of trust we build between us. We want stronger and stronger webs of trust, respect, kindness, mercy, justice – all those variants of love.

You notice something? We're right back at feed my sheep. So I have a proposal for you. Let's abandon two phrases that we seem to be stuck on like a broken record these days. Let's promise ourselves we're never again going to say either “If only we had families with young children.” nor are we ever again going to say “We're an aging congregation.” Let's promise ourselves we're going to live in the present, not the past, with our faces and hearts turned towards the future. Let's promise ourselves we're going to focus on what our strengths and resources are instead of what they aren't. Let's choose to hold up our abundance and rejoice in it. This is an amazing congregation. It's full of talented, experienced, and wise elders. And it's becoming a more and more diverse congregation age-wise. Alleluia! Yes we have aging leadership. AND yes we have

more and more younger people with talents and energy... and gifts of leadership. We are blessed. Let us say thank you Jesus. Let us say Alleluia. Just look at all this abundance that is right here, right now, in the parish of All Saints? – could I get an AMEN?