

Dec. 31, 2017

## **Is This Us? Excavating our Congregational Narrative**

Texts: Psalm 103; I Cor. 1: 1-9

One of the TV shows that has caught my attention in the last number of weeks is the show called “This is Us.” What has fascinated me is the way this family narrative is pictured in the various episodes. We begin by meeting three siblings, all born on the same day, all making important decisions re the direction of their lives. There is the sister Kate who is distressed because she has not been successful in losing weight or finding intimacy, there is the brother Kevin whose choices in an acting career are not giving him the satisfaction he seeks and there is the third sibling, Randall -- a successful business man, but whose own identity crisis is pushing him to discover his biological roots beyond this nuclear family. We discover through flashbacks that Kate and Kevin were part of a triplet pregnancy but at the birth, the third sibling was still-born. The parents, having prepared for three babies to come home, decide to adopt a black baby, Randall, who was abandoned by his father and brought to the same hospital.

As these siblings meet the various challenges of their present life, there are continuous flashbacks that help us understand the various choices that each one makes. We see how the dynamics of their relationship as children continues to affect their adult lives-- both the positive love that created these relationships but also the dysfunctional aspects of their interactions as a family. We see the opportunities that there are to repair the past and make different choices that are more life-giving to each of them. But we also see the way their emotional responses of the past tend to sabotage their best intentions. The title of the TV series: “This is Us” suggests that many of these same dynamics can be found in most of our families. I was surprised how often incidents from my own family

background crept into my consciousness as I watched the various episodes. I realized that the past and present cannot be easily separated but they interface in all of our families, creating new dynamics that shape the future.

But this family narrative also reminded me of the “On the Way Café” series that we have been pursuing this fall called “Excavating Our Congregational Narrative.” Our community may not be a nuclear “family” but it is a community with a narrative that includes the past as well as present. Our present way of being church grows out of the dynamics of the community of the past. As we make decisions about our future, as we relate to each other in this community, we realize that the past continually (though often subconsciously) intrudes into our present with its traditions, its relational dynamics and its values, ideals and failures.

This fall the adult education committee decided to focus on “narrative” and commissioned us, that is Joel Gerber, Evan Heise and myself, to focus on the formation and growth of our church-- that is on TUMC’s timeline and the stories connected to it. We were to help the group gathered on Sunday morning at 10:00 explore some of the dynamics that were present in our past and that still influence us today. And throughout the study the unarticulated question often was: Is this Us?

Michele, our pastor, thought that reviewing some of what we learned might be helpful to us on this last day of 2017. Thus, this sermon!

One way of reviewing a narrative is by creating a timeline. A timeline has a beginning and moves along in linear fashion, continuing to the present. It focuses on chronology, on the “chronos” that is the moments, the days, the years passing in equal increments--following the passage of time as a clock or watch or even a

calendar does. It is valuable for connecting past and present, showing us the inevitable process of time passing for each of us, from birth through life to death. As the Psalm writer observes, “As for humans, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.”

But, as in the TV series, creating a neat chronology begs the question: Is this really the way to look at our congregational narrative? Is the past really made up of minutes and hours that are equal in value, equal in importance? What about those moments when time seems to stand still, when the transcendent breaks into the everyday, creating a “Kairos” moment that one never forgets. Or the moments when life falls apart, when one realizes that all the efforts that were made to hold everything together are in that moment flying apart. Where and how do they fit into the chronology of life? Which memories from the past are life-giving and freeing? Which need reexamination and healing? Which contain within them the promise the God will continue to lead us in this new year?

The image that emerged for us as a committee in planning the series was the image of an archeological dig. We realized that we could not reconstruct the whole story as a historian might but we were hoping to dig deep enough at several different places in the chronology of the church, so that some of the “Kairos” moments would emerge.

When we were in Cairo for a six-month period in the year 2000, we visited several digs in process both in Egypt and in Greece. We observed how carefully the sand was sifted and how cautiously each shard, each broken piece of pottery, each little piece of bone was examined. It was important to note exactly where the artifact

was found, in which “layer” of debris and sediment it had been discovered to accurately date the piece.

The treasures that were carefully brought to the lab for further analysis were not primarily the pieces with monetary value such as precious stone. What was more important were those treasures that would reveal something vital about who the community was that had lived there —those artifacts that would either confirm or challenge the assumed narrative that had been accepted until now.

(As an aside, the artifacts in the museum in Corinth were particularly interesting to me because they contained not only reminders of the church that the biblical narrative tells us about, but also the context in which that church was born, flourished and eventually died. Standing where Paul might have preached, reading the letter that Paul wrote to the church at the time, created emotional connections for me between that church and our church. I was reminded that the life cycle of a congregation is not infinite but limited to God’s grace in sustaining a very human church as a witness to God’s work. The reason I chose the text from I Corinthians was to connect us also to those first Christians who struggled to be the body of Christ in that city.)

Every archeological dig has several stages that are part of the process. There is the identifying and excavating stage, there is the analyzing and reconstructing stage and there is the research and interpreting stage in which further background work has to happen and the discoveries are interpreted and shared. These are usually done by experts and the public only receives the end result.

But in my researching of archeological digs, I found another model which appealed to me. The particular archeological site that was being dug up was a plantation in

southern USA. This had been home to the owner of the estate and his family, but it had also been the “home” to various members of the hierarchy of servants, including overseers and slaves and their children. The planners of this archeological dig were wise because they decided it needed to be more of a “citizen scientific,” endeavor, one open to all who had a stake in the discoveries. This participatory approach would create more varied interpretations, but also more conflictual narratives because each person participating would have particular biases coming from their own heritage. A slave’s descendent might see something that the descendent of the landowner might miss. The hope was that the end result could be richer and fuller, that a multi-faceted narrative could be created that would help each stakeholder to understand the struggles, the power dynamics and the kind of reconciliation needed in that particular community.

Our “On the Way Café” community was trying for this latter kind of excavation. Throughout this fall we have invited anyone interested to hear stories, look at photos, examine objects important in the 70 or so years of history of TUMC. Anita has already pointed to some of them. (There are the photos of the ship that carried the first preachers from the Niagara region over Lake Ontario to serve the original small group of German-speaking Mennonite immigrants from Russia, gathering in homes for worship, fellowship and mutual support. There is the silver communion tray given to the congregation by the Lutheran church where the group of immigrants first held their services in 1942. There are the photos showing the building process of the two major buildings on this property. There are bulletins, directories, yearbooks, minutes of meetings. And there are the various hymnbooks used by the congregation, including several German ones.)

But the “artifacts” also include the memories and stories told by persons who were actually there during the earlier phases of TUMC’s existence. We had the privilege of hearing from some of those who have been part of this congregation the longest—Erna Huebert, Vic Heinrichs, Walter Friesen, and others from the class who have delighted us with stories of the early picnics on Lake Simcoe, the Menno house, the beginnings of some of the projects like St. Clair O’Connor housing project or the houses bought to house the Vietnamese refugees in the 1970’s. There are the stories by the partners and planners who live with us in our building or with whom we have partnered in our outreach and service endeavors. It has been good to have Adolfo Puricelli with us to help us look more critically at those partnerships. Our architects have helped us see how we have designed and shaped the buildings but also how the buildings have shaped us. There are videotapes that Walter Friesen with assistance of other members of the congregation has made of earlier pastors and leaders reflecting on their time at TUMC—these have yet to be examined by members of the class.

Slowly a chronological timeline is forming in our minds in which we can see various trajectories winding their way through the years. Events can be placed on the timeline, pastors and leaders can be named, various service projects and buildings that were purchased or built. In fact, one exercise we did was to write our own name on the timeline, indicating when we had first begun attending TUMC. (This led to asking what our motives had been in that first visit and to ask the question of how visitors today find out about TUMC and what they are looking for.)

Even as we dig further into the history we can begin to see patterns emerging. For example, we have named several trajectories that wind their way through our

congregational life. What I name a “trajectory” is when a particular pattern or model of congregational life begins to evolve and grow, showing up in various forms in our timeline. For example, Walter Friesen helped us see how the very simple organizational structure that was begun in response to the needs of the small group of people began to grow and multiply until now we are as much a “committeed” group as a committed one (as Michele described it at a recent Newcomers breakfast.) We learned that again and again the congregation reacted to a top-down approach of decision-making opting instead for as much participation as possible by as many people as possible. There were efforts made at various times, to move toward a simpler structure, but again and again the congregation chose team approaches. Note the importance we give to the caring team and the preaching team. Our recent hiring of a 3-member team to respond to the pastoral needs of our youth is only another example of the direction we have been heading all along. The question that we still have not adequately explored is “why” this direction? Is it grounded on our Anabaptist theology, is it a phenomenon of urbanization or is it simply taking each person and their gifts seriously. . . ?

There were other trajectories that were named. One, a trajectory of service and community work can be observed as it cropped up in a variety of forms throughout the years. There were the boy’s clubs organized for the community during the time when Nicholas Dick was the pastor., there were the 100 Vietnamese refugees that were assisted in the 1970’s as they made their home in Toronto, there was the involvement with Lazarus rising and the establishment of the street ministry in the downtown area. And always there were the involvements with projects for MCC and Ten Thousand Villages. Interestingly, the immigrant experiences of the first

members of the church contributed to the motivation for continued support of these various initiatives.

A trajectory toward hospitality and inclusion can also be seen but this seemed to create more conflict within the congregation as well as between the congregation and the denominational church throughout its history. Very early on, during the World War II, the pastor of this fledgling congregation welcomed Mennonite young men and their friends who were in the armed forces to attend the church. To have men in uniform sitting in the congregation was interpreted by the denomination as a loss of the heritage of being a peace church. But perhaps this was the first stage of learning to be hospitable to all, inviting all to come and worship and to be transformed through the meeting with God. Or there was the conflict over the marriage of someone whose spouse had disappeared during the war in Russia. How long should the spouse wait here in Canada before remarrying? Not everyone agreed with the pastor who performed the marriage ceremony for one such couple. They became long term members of this congregation. The trajectory continued with the struggle to make room in our congregation for persons with physical disabilities, with differing cultural backgrounds, with trauma related emotional injuries, and in the last number of years with gender and sexual identities different from the majority. Why this evolving stance of openness toward diversity and inclusion? Was it due to the fact that we became part of the urban culture around us, or was this due to the intentional discernment of the congregation, or was the wind of the Spirit blowing in our midst?

Other trajectories can be mentioned. The cultural and musical heritage of this church that has welcomed the artists in our midst while emphasizing the



contributions of each person no matter how amateur, in our congregational music making. Our singing of the Hallelujah chorus at the end of the joyful all-generational carol singing evening illustrates beautifully the balance between professionalism and full participation of everyone that TUMC seems to be moving toward. The hope is that every gift is valued but we know that many gifts are still buried waiting to be released within our midst.

We have not yet explored a theological trajectory? Are we naming God differently now than we did earlier? Is there a trajectory toward deepening a personal relationship, or is the trajectory away from a personal to a more abstract relationship? Was the God we named earlier a God of patriarchy? Have we now moved to a God of many names? Is this a good move or are we just conforming to a trend in our culture? And where does the Bible fit into our theology?

But as we dig deeper we also see how trajectories are sometimes interrupted or there is a definite move away from the particular direction assumed. When we did not know how to handle our complex relationship with one of our members who had experienced much violence himself, and in turn was violent to others, we wondered whether exclusion was not a better way. When we were unable to resolve the differing understandings of sexuality and gender identity in 2003 we resorted to political maneuvering and other power moves that created anger, much pain and deep divisions among us. We do continue to hear stories of persons who have felt rejected by our congregation, or have felt uncomfortable in our midst because they think differently than the majority. We know that we still have much to learn about welcoming all. We know that some people's gifts have been valued more than others, that some folks have felt left out, that undue power has been used to put some people down.

But seeing trajectories in our timeline is only one way to look at our history. There were also moments that continue to define who TUMC is for each of us personally. These are more like “kairos” moments, moments that each one of us holds dear because something shifted within us at that moment and we felt the presence of God through this community. Our time at the “On the way café” has been too brief to hear all of these stories.

However, I will name a few of my own, some of which might resonate with you and perhaps will help you recall your own “Kairos” moments.

\*The Christmas Eve in 1996 when we had the first service in this building. The song, “O Come O Come Emmanuel” had never sounded so beautiful to me, as in our new building where the good acoustics amplified the congregational singing, inviting Christ into our midst.

\*The celebration by the three partners who built this church in 1997. I will always remember the members of the New Life congregation, The New Life Centre and TUMC folk dancing up and down the aisles together just as they had worked so many volunteer hours side by side to make this possible.

\*Baptisms—being a faith partner and meeting before the ceremony to hear the faith stories

\*Our small group where we share deeply our struggles and joys

\*Scripture story telling like at our last Christmas Eve service

\*The children singing, gathering the offering, creating a Bethlehem Village for us all; the youth leading a worships service; the wedding services, the funeral celebrations of some of our members.

Not all Kairos moments were joyful ones. For me the lament service after our very divisive process around sexuality in 2003 was very painful but began a healing process that continues.

\*For me the congregational meeting when we affirmed that our pastors could officiate at gay weddings was a Kairos moment, as I heard person after person individually say “I affirm” as the microphone was passed down the row.

\*And then there were the many worships services where I became aware of a new insight or experienced a moment of joy or forgiveness or acceptance or love.

Psalms 103 is one of those all-encompassing Psalms filled with praise for who God is as God moves among us. It seems to me that it also encompasses all that we as a congregation have been experiencing both in our chronological dig and in the dig for these “Kairos” moments. There is the forgiveness for our failures and sins, there is a reminder of the story still to be written, there is compassion for us in our weakness and there is hope for the future.

For the conclusion of this sermon I have adapted Psalm 103 for us as a congregation. I hope that as we read it we can say: Yes, “This is Us.” Though we may not all interpret our story the same way, we can speak our praise together, knowing it is God who has called our church into being and who will lead us into the future. I invite Anita to lead us in this litany.

### **Psalm 103 (Adapted by Lydia Harder for TUMC, Dec. 31, 2017)**

Praise the God whom we name Lord,  
all you who are gathered here.  
From the depth of who we are,

let us praise God's holy name!

**Praise the Lord and don't forget the story of God's faithfulness--  
a story lived out in many times and places,  
a story lived out also in this congregation.**

Praise the God who forgives our sins,  
and heals our pain and distress;

**who rescues us when we are in despair,  
and continually lifts us up with steadfast love and kindness;**

who has showered us with goodness and mercy,  
renewing us as a congregation when our light grows dim.

**God is a God of righteousness and peace;  
actively seeking justice for those who are oppressed.**

Throughout our history as a congregation,  
God has tried to show us

how to bring about a new world of hope and joy.

**God has been merciful and gracious to us,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

Though we have sometimes been slow to learn,  
God does not always accuse us,  
nor will God stay angry with us forever.

**For God does not deal with us according to our failures,  
nor repay us according to our self-centered thoughts and actions.**

For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so great is God's steadfast love toward those who honor and love God.

**As far as the east is from the west,  
so far does God remove our sins from us.**

As parents have compassion for their children,  
so God has compassion for those who love and honour their Creator.

**For God knows that we are human,  
with all of the human temptations, desires and vulnerabilities.**

(This Christmas we have been reminded again of God's readiness  
to identify with our humanness, dwelling among us  
as God did through Jesus, the Christ).

**As a congregation we create a congregational story  
that flourishes like a flower of the field.**

But when its cycle is done, our congregation too may be forgotten  
and few will remember its place in history.

**But the steadfast love of God will be from everlasting to everlasting  
on all who honor and love God,  
and justice and mercy will be there for the generations to come,  
for all who keep their covenant with God,  
and remember to follow in God's ways.**

**So today let us praise the God whom we name Lord.  
Let us trust God's compassion and love for us,  
As we enter the year 2018 and the unknown future.  
*We know God is faithful!*  
*Together we will praise God's holy name!***