

Sermon TUMC - September 13, 2020 - GATHERING SUNDAY
What is being revealed? (About the character of the church)

*Prayer of illumination: Gracious God, as we turn to your Word for us,
may the Spirit of God rest upon us.
Help us to be steadfast in our hearing,
in our speaking, in our believing, and in our living. Amen*

Genesis 50:15-17 (21)

Romans 14:1-12

Psalm 103:(1-7), 8-13

Michele Rizoli

Hello everyone,

I'm coming to you from our church building. Yes, it's all still here, waiting for a time when we can return. (all the fake plants still look fine, don't worry, and we finally took the Lent decorations down!) It felt important to preach from here as we return from Summer distractions and regroup as a Church community.

Consider it an anchor of hope for us for a time when we can meet here again face to face, and hear our singing and our visiting and our children echoing in these walls.

During our COVID isolation I found myself cocooning, staying away from news and from most personal interactions. It was like stopping the world and getting off, a privilege I do not take lightly.

But now that I'm back in the land of the masked living, I'm feeling more keenly the pressures all of us have been under. There is so much uncertainty about what happens next: next season, next election, next week, next batch of COVID numbers. The world has lost some of its bearings and so have we.

I tried to list of all the things just for this one week: 9/11, the fire tornados, gender reveal parties, numbers rising, take your pick. I don't need to tell you what we are collectively experiencing. Your anxiety levels already know.

And so I found an image that kind of captures what it feels like (*describe it*):

Me looking outside to see what chapter of Revelation we're doing today.



Though I will not be preaching on the book of Revelation today, there are a couple of things about this woman's question that ring true. Times like we are living right now **are** times of "revelation" not in the sense of end of the world — although some things are coming to an end — but in the sense that the true nature of things becomes clear; the nature of people in stress mode, the fragility of systems as they start to break down.

All that energy that was used to keep up façades is now going towards survival (or towards anxiety) and what is underneath is showing through.

Let me give you a few examples:

- A friend commented to me that they are getting angry a lot more intensely and a lot more often than before, and said "I didn't know I had that in me." — I wonder if anyone else has experienced a rise and a speed of anger that wasn't there before?
- Police brutality has come to the fore within North America — folks in other places around the world have been aware of it for some time, btw.
- Ugly racism and hatred have come to the fore in the most unexpected places, people are not ashamed to hate — and now everyone knows that it is there, not just the people who have been suffering racism for ages.
- There's a lot more talk of "us and them." — including among families and church folk. This is not the language of peacemaking.
- The inequalities of our society are displayed to us very close at hand as we go downtown or into the parks and see how many people do not have proper shelter and are living in tents as the housing system breaks down. — we are seeing how fragile living conditions are in our city.

- And, the true character of political leaders is also on display during crisis. Some of them are not looking so good, to put it mildly. There are real and justifiable reasons to be concerned.

There are positive things being revealed as well: how little we really need to consume in order to live, we see how much nature appreciates us travelling less, what work looks like from home, what it looks like to care for the common good.

It is a revelation.

In the biblical book of Revelation, we often remember all the scary things. But the main thing about Revelation is question is “What is the Spirit saying to the churches?”

And so the Preaching Team has decided to face this question head on this Fall and ask as our theme: “What is being revealed?” We will seek what the Spirit is saying to us here at TUMC, as the world continues to serve up whatever comes next.

This is a crucial time for the church when positive thinking and gratitude — wonderful as they are — unfortunately are not going to be enough. Nor is it enough to hunker down until it’s all over — for a start, not everyone can do that and this should be a cause for concern for the Church.

Doug Klassen, Executive Minister of Mennonite Church Canada observed in a recent article that “Throughout history, the Christian church flourished during times of epidemics and restrictions. Early Christians created community by ministering to their immediate neighbours. These communities worshipped together, but the hallmarks of their identity were acts of love and charity to the lonely, vulnerable and suffering.”

The character of the Church, the body of Christ, our character as peacemakers, justice-seekers, mercy extenders, is urgently being called out. We must reveal these traits.

I am so grateful to have a Christian community and to be led by a mysterious, loving and merciful God. Let us keep on asking ourselves: What is the Spirit saying to TUMC?

Soto start, I suggest we turn to our scripture passages for today, and see what the Spirit might be saying to us today.

I’d like to suggest three things for us to work on our character this next week: Do not judge. Strive for reconciliation. Trust in God.

First let’s have a look at Romans 14:1-12 and read “Do not judge.” No, I am not going to talk about veganism and vegetarianism, tempting as it is - not. :-) The apostle Paul was speaking

into a very real community conflict in his time: folks arguing about rules around what was OK and what wasn't OK to eat, because these things had deep religious meaning for them.

People haven't changed that much, and though we don't fret as much about food, could anyone else identify with the feelings in this passage? I know I could.

What if I changed a few words? Have a listen:

Some believe in wearing a mask all the time, while the weak do not wear masks. Some desire to gather in person, while others feel safer at home. Those who mask must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who wear them; for God has welcomed them...

...Some judge one social distance to be better than another, while others judge all distances to be alike. ... We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

So here's a time of confession for me, perhaps it is because of my long time of isolation; I've lost some crucial social skills, and I find it tremendously unnerving when people are not wearing masks, not wearing them properly or disregarding all the widely agreed upon rules for everyone's protection. My temper flares unreasonably inside of me and I want to call them names and consider them less than myself.

What is revealed is a great lack of patience deep in my gut as fiery darts come out of my eyes and judgemental thoughts fester inside of me. It is not at all a Christ-like attitude.

Why do we judge? Sometimes it is because we are afraid, sometimes it is because we are self-righteous, sometimes it is because we are suffering and we want others to suffer the same, it doesn't seem fair when they are not following the rules.

If I'm alone, then this part of the sermon was just for me — thank you, Holy Spirit! But if anyone else is dealing with this rush to visceral judgement every time you go out, it's pretty clear that Scripture is calling the faithful not to judge.

Our true character must be grounded in love for each other, whatever the other's views and practices. We all stand before God.

Our second scripture passage today I will read as an allegory for the call to reconciliation. It does not do justice to the whole narrative of Joseph or of Genesis, but I think it captures the cultural moment we are in.

This passage is at a crucial point in the story of Joseph and his brothers. If you want an interesting read, I suggest you spend some of your afternoon looking at Genesis 37 to 51 - reader discretion is advised.

The very very short version, the trailer, for our purposes today, is that Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. He was not treated like a brother.

They took his amazing technicolour dreamcoat —the special garment his father had given him—covered it in blood and lied to his father that Joseph had been killed. They considered themselves better than Joseph. They created a false narrative.

Lots of important things happen... (you can read all about it, like I said) God takes good care of Joseph. At an important turning point, Joseph arranges to feed all his brothers during a famine, including their elderly father, and then the father dies. At this point, the brothers become very afraid, because they know that they wronged their brother and that they no longer have their father's protection. Their true situation, their past sin, is revealed.

In this moment we don't know what will happen next.

We too as a society and as people who are mostly white and wealthy (mostly) are being confronted with a shared history where fellow human beings — indigenous and people of colour, for example— were not treated as siblings but rather were traded, sold, mistreated, stolen from. Black Lives Matter is just one of the loud cries that we cannot not ignore or dismiss. The tensions very nearby in Caledonia are another.

This is not an individual sin, you might personally be a very nice and fair person, I know you, you all are. But it is a sin that is part of the very systems we live in and we benefit from: systems of property rights, employment, of how history is recorded and remembered, of how goods are traded, of who has power and who does not.

The climate insecurity, the ravages of the virus upon racialized communities, the shameless and hateful political discourse in which we are living, all reveal what was always there: we have not treated each other as siblings, as brothers and sisters who love each other as ourselves, and that is not what God wants for humanity.

This is hugely important and now is a time when we are being confronted with it and asked to change.

The Church's true character as peacemakers and justice-seekers is being called out. Now more than ever, we must strive towards reconciliation and Shalom.

Our final passage, Psalm 103 reminds us of the most important part of all: trust in God.

We are not alone in any of this. We are not limited to ourselves and to our own devices. We are collectively in the care of a God who is beyond all circumstance. A God who has seen countless systems rise and fall like dust.

Here's what the psalmist knew and hoped for.

As you hear these words, filter them through all the issues I've raised this morning. You might feel like responding with a hardy "Amen," a tentative "I hope," or a faltering "I wonder": We are all here together to bring those reactions and to hold each other up. Listen to psalm 103.¹

The Holy One works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.

The Holy One is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The Holy One will not always accuse,
nor keep anger for ever.
God does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is God's steadfast love towards those who revere God;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far God removes our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Holy One has compassion for those who revere God.

For God knows how we were made;
And remembers that we are dust.

I really wanted to preach to us that everything will be OK, but we don't know that for sure.

What we do know is our character as the body of Christ.
We know that our God will be with us, that God is faithful, that the cause of justice is the right one, that the path of love, shown to us through Jesus, is the path of life. Let's hold on to that.

What is being revealed? What is the Spirit saying to the church? For today it is to lean in to our Christ-like character. To practice these things: Do not judge. Strive for reconciliation. Trust in God.

¹ (NRSV adapted to remove gendered language)

