

Devotion: March 10th, 2021

Today marks exactly one year from the day that Covid-19 started to affect our lives in profound ways. Though the timeline of the church is not nearly as important as what has happened in each of our lives and with our families, I did find it interesting to reflect back on that week back in March 2020 and to remember just how quickly things changed. A year ago, today, Tofield Council met, as we had normally done many times before around the table in the church office. We had gathered to talk about the work of the community and events important days that were approaching like the days of Holy Week. Towards the end of the meeting, the second of three new business items the following was discussed, and I am quoting the minutes of that meeting here now, because I found it fascinating how we were taking it seriously, but in no way could we imagine just how serious it would become,

1. Precautionary Measures: The national office released health guidelines for churches:-

- Serve communion in individual cups, with cubed bread – served with tongs.
- Pass the peace without touching; minister not to shake hands after worship.
- Have bulletins on the table and allow people to pick up their own.
- People to fill their own coffee cups; if food served, serve with plastic gloves.

All these precautionary measures will be placed in the bulletin and put up on the screen on Sunday. These will be in place until the threat of illness from Covid 19 has passed.

The next item in the minutes was a discussion about creating a little library box outside of the church so that people could leave a book and then pick up a book. The order of these two items shows that even though we were taking the talk of COVID 19 seriously, that we also did not fully understand how it would change our lives; and how could we? The next day, just after lunch, I began a drive to Holden to meet with a group of folks from our community of faith who together were taking part in a Lenten faith study. Along the way my phone rang, and the chair of Holden council asked if I had seen the recent news. Having not, she explained to me that the provincial government was raising the alarm with confirmed cases of the virus not just in the bigger centres, but also in places like Vegreville. As I sat parked in someone's driveway along highway 14, we made the decision to not gather that day for the study, just in case.

By Friday evening I can recall turning to my wife Stephanie and saying, "I wonder if we should be having church this Sunday?" By mid morning, the next day, I had received calls and text messages from a number of members of our communities including both our council chairs, who were also quite concerned and questioning if we should postpone church for one Sunday and see how the week went. By about 3pm Saturday afternoon that decision was made not to gather for worship and a year later we are still waiting to return back to in person worship and return to some understanding of life as we knew it.

It felt important to recall that process today, not just because of how interesting it is to remember how quickly things changed, but also to remember just how implausible the whole thing seemed. We were making choices that we thought, at most, would affect a week or two of our lives; yet a year later we realize just how wrong we were, but also how right we were to make the choices we did. Now in remembering all of this it would be so easy to say, “we should have done this or that, or should not have done this or that,” it also can be grief inducing to think just how long it has been; but I want to go in different direction, and what to focus what seemed implausible.

Never once during my Master of Divinity program did a discussion occur around what would happen if we could not physically lead the churches we were called to serve. Never once did we talk about online church as the focus of gathering rather than an extra connection piece. Never did we talk or reflect upon what it would be like to lead and serve communities of faith without a central place to gather. Yet, this is our current situation and the reality of the last year and I have no doubt that those conversations are now happening at seminaries, business and school all around the world; indeed, this last year has changed the world. Change though is not always bad. For example, I know now, without question, that a community faith can still be a community a faith without a building. I now know that even though its not perfect and that I miss the cookies and coffee, that pastoral care can be effective over the phone or through text messages, email and online. I now know, and this may seem odd, but is important nonetheless, I now know that God’s blessings to do not rely on our practises, traditions and normal ways of doing things to be revealed.

With all of that said I certainly do not want to just be an online minister. I deeply miss the connections and gatherings and all that accompanies those wonderful times. I miss the celebrations and walking together as a community of faith. I miss singing the hymns of our tradition with a multitude of voices. At the same time though, it is so important to name that we, in face of everything, remained a community of faith. We continued to hold one another in prayer, to celebrate important life events, to grieve and to worship God. The work of our communities continued. The laughter and joy of each others company, even online, continued. As we look ahead to the coming months and promises of all that they will hold, I want us not to forget how in the face of challenge, change and hardship that we, with God’s leading, found ways to grow and adapt and to remain deeply connected to one another. At the end of the day, as look back on this past year, I can say that I truly have learned the important and value of community and for me its priceless.

And so, as we mark this day, I invite you to pray with me,

Loving God, we thank you so much for your presence and blessings in our lives. We thank you so much for all that we have learned through this time of hardship and growth. We thank you that these communities of faith have continued to flourish and to hold each other in grace and care. With the hope that is before us, that this time of pandemic may come to an end, we remember

before you all of those who seek to feel the burden of their grief lifted and pains of their loneliness cease and may we as your people seek to be the light Christ for them, as they are the light of Christ for us. Importantly O Lord, may never forget how through the struggles and challenge of the last year that you have blessed us and that we have blessed one another. We thank you for the ability we have to remain connected, the hope we have in our communities and the joys that it has been to learn and grow. May we, as your people, remember and be guided in the days to come to know fully that we are not limited by the bounds we had previously placed ourselves in, but rather are, and will continue to be, people not defined or limited by our buildings, structures and traditions, but rather a community defined by your light, love, grace and hope in our lives. Amen.

Sincerely,
Rev. Adam Hall