

This morning's sermon has been prepared for us by Bishop Michael Pryse. This morning, Bishop Susan Johnson and Bishop Pryse will preside at the concluding worship service of our Synod Assembly, along with the approximately 300 delegates and visitors who have gathered this week in Toronto, Ontario. Bishop Pryse writes,

Grace and peace be with you! It's a privilege to be able to be part of your worship service this morning and to bring you greetings from the pastors, diaconal ministers, lay delegates, staff and visitors who are with me today in Toronto, Ontario as we conclude our 17th biennial Synod Assembly. I hope that these words will in some way help you to feel a sense of connection to your wider church community - a community that our Assembly delegates have embodied during these four days of shared worship, study, prayer and decision making.

As I pen these words, I cannot presume to know the outcomes of this important gathering. Much of that will be determined by what our delegates, led and guided by the Holy Spirit, bring to our shared deliberations. I do, however, anticipate that we will experience a number of significant moments in our time together as we convene under the theme "Liberated by God's Grace ... to be neighbour."

We will have spent time meeting with, and learning from, neighbours in the community who many of us may not have previously engaged in a meaningful way. Neighbours of other faith traditions. Neighbours of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Neighbours bearing the weight of extreme poverty and

homelessness. As disciples who have been liberated by God's grace, we will seek to draw, sing and pray a wider circle of kinship and neighbourliness.

Our first of three Bible studies will focus on the parable of the good Samaritan. The story is so familiar, perhaps too familiar! A lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds with the question, "What is written in the law?" The lawyer responds correctly, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, the lawyer asks Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus responds with a story. A man is attacked by robbers and left near dead. A priest, and then a Levite, see the wounded man and pass by. A Samaritan, however, stops, binds the man's wounds and takes him to an inn where he covers all the expenses until the man is fully recovered. "Which of the three was a neighbour to the man who fell among robbers," Jesus asks? His listener responds, "the one who showed mercy." And Jesus says to him, "Go and do likewise."

Most of us, if encountering a neighbour in need, will respond with care and mercy. That's what neighbours do. I suspect, however, that if asked to identify who our neighbours are, we would be inclined to reference a pretty small circle of people with whom we share close bonds of social or geographic kinship. The people who live next door. My colleagues at work. Those who I sit closest to at church.

I suspect the Levite and the priest would respond in similar fashion. Certainly we can assume they did not perceive the wounded man to be a neighbour. How, otherwise, could they have possibly failed to respond to his obvious and

urgent need, even despite possible religious prohibitions against touching those who were wounded or dead? The Samaritan, on the other hand, clearly did view this man as being his neighbour. Somehow, his circle of kinship had been drawn wide. Where the others had seen the wounded man as someone to be avoided, the Samaritan saw a neighbour in need; and he responded in kind. Jesus says, "Go and do likewise."

In this morning's Gospel lesson, we hear and witness Jesus' response to another question. While "crossing to the other side" on the Sea of Galilee - at night and seemingly with little preparation for the voyage - a violent windstorm is encountered. Jesus' terrified disciples wake their slumbering master and plead, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

It's yet another of many occasions where we encounter Jesus in circumstances and places of significant transition or risk. The Sea of Galilee was both kinds of places, separating the peoples of one shore from those on the other side; essentially Jews on one side of the lake and Gentiles on the other. It was, and still is, prone to sudden weather changes. Storms can literally blow in at an instant. But Jesus will not be dissuaded!

We shouldn't be surprised. Jesus, as we know, was continually "crossing over to the other side." He was willing to cross all of the boundaries that had been set up to demarcate social and religious lines between those deemed to be righteous and those deemed to be unrighteous. He's willing "to be neighbour" for the sake of the kingdom of God, even if it means bending or changing the rules and going against all accepted convention, no matter what storms are encountered along the way.

In his commentary on this passage, New Testament scholar Matthew Skinner writes, "Jesus ... sets people free to enter into a new future in freedom and wholeness. He meddles with borders, not because he has a penchant for chaos, but because the reign of God extends divine holiness and a commitment to human well-being to places that we might have thought were beyond the limits. To him, no place is desolate. No one is abandoned. Nothing will inhibit his desire to do ministry on "the other side."https://www.workingpreacher.org/?lect_date=06/24/2018&lectionary=rcl

We who are a part of the mainline, Canadian Christian ecosystem are presently encountering some very stormy weather. In many regards, it's feeling like this boat is close to getting swamped! Participation levels are down, finances are stretched, and our public profile is virtually non-existent. Many congregations see themselves as "running out of runway" and clergy are fearful and anxious about their continued job security. We keep bailing as hard and fast as we can but it sometimes feels like this ship is sinking! And in our despair, we too, like the disciples on that night time Galilean cruise, are tempted to cry out, "Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?"

And I suspect that Jesus' response would echo the words of today's gospel. "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" "Do you really think that I would bring you to this place only for you to perish?"

I don't think Jesus only rebuked the wind and the rain that day. He rebuked the disciples. "Peace. Be still!" "Yes, it's stormy. But we're going to the other side. Don't be afraid. It's gonna be all right."

In the fifth chapter of Luke's Gospel we read another story of Jesus and the disciples on the water. In this instance, Jesus, after speaking to the crowds from Simon's boat, directs Peter to "put out into the deep" for a catch. The

disciples had apparently been fishing with all night with little to show for their efforts. Reluctantly, Peter and his companions trust Jesus' words, push out to the deep water, cast the nets and "when they had done this, they caught a great number of fish" (Lk 5:6).

In very plain terms, Jesus is reminding the disciples who actually determines the extent of the catch in this enterprise. It's one of those many stories in the Bible where God's people are cautioned against becoming over-dependent upon themselves and their own resourcefulness.

I sometimes wonder whether this is what mainline North American Christians have been experiencing for the past thirty years. I sometimes wonder whether we had become overly comfortable during those glory days of the 1950's and sixties and were in need of a corrective! Oh the fishing was good back then! Talk about church growth! In the early 1960's North American Lutherans were establishing new congregations at the rate of 1 per week. Between 1950 and 1980, 81 congregations were established on the territory of the Eastern Synod. Virtually everyone was coming to church. The Sunday Schools were full to overflowing. The Lord's Day act kept the stores closed and there were no Sunday sports leagues! "By God, the fishing was good!"

Were we necessarily better fisherman? Or did we just have the good fortune to be fishing in a stocked pond, at the right time of day when the fish just happened to be biting? Was the church really any more faithful, or were we simply the fortunate recipients of a cultural delivery system that had created a gravitational pull toward the churches?

I don't know. But I do know that we can never put our trust in anything other than God; not in our own resourcefulness or creativity; not in laws that give our faith a favoured position in society; not in anything that even remotely challenges God's role as the one who will bring this wondrous kingdom to fuller expression in God's own time, and for God's own purpose.

Sometimes that means we will fish all night and catch nothing. It means encountering fierce storms that may seem capable of sinking us. We don't determine the weather and neither do we determine the extent of the catch. That's not our job. Our job is to be faithful; particularly during those waiting times; during those long nights when the winds are blowing hard or when the muscles of our arms do not tighten under the weight of the fish.

At this week's Synod Assembly we will have considered what it means to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

We will have heard Jesus call to go across to the other side; to put out into the depth of God our creator - to put out into the depth of our neighbours, despite whatever storms we might encounter on the way.

By the liberating power of God's grace, we will have been empowered to go deeper and further into our primary mission. And if this has indeed been the case, the "net effect" of our time together will have been full and abundant to overflowing. Thanks be to God!