

Re-membered by Christ

James 1:2-8; Romans 12:1-5

Good Morning Church Family,

It is so, so good to see all of you and be together again. I've been anticipating this day with excitement, joy and trepidation. But, here we are, together, by the grace of God. Thanks be to God.

It has been a long haul for us, being physically separated from one another, this church building, from weekly services, from many of the rituals that ground us in our faith and in our lives. It has been roughly six months since we last gathered in this space, six months since we walked through these doors and found our familiar seats, looked across the rows at our friends, neighbours, sister and brothers in Christ. As someone told me a couple weeks ago, "Zoom just doesn't cut it." Yet, we also know, as good and beautiful as it is to be together, this still isn't normal. This still isn't fully how we'd like it to be. The seating arrangement is different, we cannot smell the coffee brewing the kitchen, we cannot hug

another...I can't tell if anyone is sticking out their tongues at me right now. We are together, but not in the fullness of expression that I think we long to be.

When I thought about what to preach on this morning, I wanted us to be aware of that tension together. We want to rejoice that we're together, and have this be a bit of celebration, but we also don't want to ignore the fact this is difficult, the fact that we may be living with Covid restrictions for quite some time yet. And ultimately, as people of God, we want to place our hope and our security in Jesus Christ and his Kingdom of resurrection and life. So, keeping that ultimate aim in our minds and hearts, what does the Bible have to say to Christians, like us, in difficult times?

Let's turn to the book of James, and I'll read James 2:1-8 again, "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing. If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and

tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do.”

Last week, I participated in MCSask’s Virtual Town Hall meeting on Re-Opening Church and one of the things we did together was listening to this passage from James read from a couple of different versions and then breaking into small groups to talk about any ideas, questions or whispering of the Spirit that our listening had sparked. It was a group Lectio Divina exercise. As my little group of four people reflected on the text together, this is some of the wisdom from James that bubbled up.

First, our perspective, how we view this hard season we are in, does matter. James tells us, “Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy.” Consider it an opportunity for great joy. This is such a counter-cultural shift from the North American way of living. When trouble comes our way, our culture admonishes us to fix it, solve it, work harder than before to overcome it; we can be victorious over this thing. And oftentimes, our culture has enough money, power or political will to overcome troubles, we see this attitude at play especially for our neighbours to the south.

But us, as people of God, we are not told to work harder, to overcome, or even to demand that our great and powerful God overcomes this, rather, we are told to consider it an opportunity for joy. Why are troubles, like this one an “opportunity for joy”? James goes on, “For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing.”

We are to consider trouble an opportunity for joy because it will grow our faith. Romans 5:4 gets at the same idea this way,, “Knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and endurance, character and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us.”

A faith that is never tested, never put under pressure or strain does not grow in the same way as one that does. I think of how my Grandpa would always, “harden off” the tomato seedlings that he planted in his sunporch, bringing them out in the mid-morning and back inside at night to allow the plants to be tested in the elements, to develop strength to allow them to produce Good Fruit.

When I encounter a problem or some sort of personal difficulty that I can't fix or overcome, my tendency is to just white knuckle it, to hold on tight until I can get through the other side as quickly as possible. Grit my teeth and keep going.

There have been times during Covid when this has been my attitude, I've pushed down the frustration and the grief that Covid life has brought and just ignored it.

But James discourages us from doing this, listen to these verses again from the NRSV, "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces

endurance; and **let endurance have its full effect**, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing." Let endurance have it's full effect. As hard as

this is, as God's people, we can lament and grieve certainly, but if we really want to grow good fruit from Covid, indeed from any kind of trouble, then we must

acknowledge what is happening, both the good and the hard, and allow Christ to grow good things from this for us and our church. Is Covid a good thing, a source

of joy? No, I can't think of a single person who would say that. Please don't hear me say that we should be jumping up and down with a smile on our face saying

how much joy covid has brought us because that's a godly response. No.

However, can God take this whole mess, this interruption, this pandemic and grow us through it? Absolutely. We worship the Risen Christ who can make our

troubles and our pain *matter*.

Just as James admonishes the church to choose a perspective that allows God to form us, Paul, in the book of Romans calls to live self-sacrificially as an offering of worship to our God.

Romans 12: 1-5 reads, “And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don’t think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ’s body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.”

This passage says a lot of us as the people of God in hard times. Specifically, I think about the call for Christians to live our lives thinking of others. As I’ve

watched the pandemic unfold in my home country of the US, as I have conversations with friends and family there, I've worried, "Have we lost the capacity or the will to live with others in mind?" Has the prevailing culture become so individualized, so centered on the rights of individuals that we risk losing the very soul of the human community. Very early on during Covid, when the strictest lockdowns were in place in the US and Canada, someone wrote, "Our grandparents were asked to go to war for their country when they were 18 years old. We're just being asked to stay home and sit on our couches."

Community, whether it's rooted in the church or otherwise, is always a gift *and* responsibility. This Romans text reminds us that we must sacrifice our bodies, our lives, our day to day existence as an act of worship. And what does scripture tell us about that sacrifice? "One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important? Jesus replied, "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

Jesus taught his followers that the most important thing is to love God and love people. And when we are faced with troubles as large as Global Health Pandemic, we, as the church, must ask ourselves, How do I best love my neighbour right now? I realize this answer will look different for each of us, given our context, our daily lives, our own understanding of what a comfortable level of risk is. Because we have been taught through scripture and through the life of Jesus what love looks like, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails, “ says 1 Corinthians 7:1-8.

What questions can we ask of ourselves and of our church about how to love our neighbours well? What sacrifices can we make for the good of others? How can we, as God’s People, not become conformed to the patterns of this world, but instead allow Christ to renew our minds? When we as committees and church council sat down to talk about reopening for in-person services, these are the questions we asked. I know some churches are choosing a different plan, or a more relaxed approach, and I’m not saying we got this all right; every church has its own story, it’s own needs. But the arch of the Christian narrative always

honours sacrificing our own desires on the altar for love for God and neighbour. Let us not be afraid of that.

Despite all that has happened in our world, our lives and the life of this church over the last 6 months, we are here together this morning. Thanks be to God.

When we gather like this, as sisters and brothers in Christ and we fix our eyes, hearts and worship on Jesus Christ, on remembering the life, death and resurrection of him, we too are Re-membered. I don't mean remembered in the cognitive sense, as in recalling a past event, I mean re-membered as in becoming members with each other again, as in being put back together. Christ takes all that is broken, severed, awkward, covered in a facemask, not what we want and promises us that Jesus alone is enough. We have been scattered, split apart by Covid, but now we have been brought back together, re-membered, by the one who makes all things new, by the one who poured himself out for our sakes.

Christian Piatt, in his article *Re-Membering: The Heart of the Gospel* writes this, "We tend to think of being broken as a bad thing, which is understandable, especially in a culture that holds up perfection as the only true ideal. But whereas

the world may suggest that imperfection is justification for an extreme makeover, we as followers of Christ see it as a curiously beautiful common thread that holds all of us together. It's in that brokenness that we find the jagged edges in ourselves that fit together with others. Jesus was big on finding power in brokenness too. In fact, he took the bread at the heart of the Jewish Seder meal and gave it new meaning in it's broken-open state. He took what was a part of each of their daily lives, blessed it with new meaning and shared it with others. And we're called to do the same."

God shows up at the table, in communion, in the nothing fancy. In socially distanced rooms. In masked faces. In church parking lots. God is here and we remember him even as we are "re-membered". We remember Jesus and the beautiful, sacrificial thing that the gospel is, that is something no pandemic, no trouble can take from us. It's good to be together again. Amen.