

Sermon: Rediscovering Community

(Jointly preached by the Rev. Paul Wu and Mark Hamilton,
on Camp Sunday at St. Giles Presbyterian Church, May 8, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Paul asks Mark: You arrived at Gracefield during the current pandemic. What has it been like to try and form and maintain community at camp in the midst of the pandemic?

Mark Responds: It's not easy, that is for sure. Some days it is not unlike pushing a boulder up a hill! But I don't think that we reached that hill when the pandemic started though. In 2020 Netflix released a documentary called "The Last Blockbuster". One of the things that I found interesting about it was the reminder of how much things have changed over the years. I used to know the guy at the video store, he used to suggest movies based on what he thought I would like, but also based on things that he liked. It was personal and it was relational.

The fact that we all have cell phones now has changed things too. We now call people instead of places, gone are the days when I had to talk to my friend Paul's mother before talking to Paul.

I feel like we were heading in this direction before we had heard of COVID 19. What it did was accelerate things in the direction that they were already headed.

David Spangler - An American spiritual philosopher has said "Some people think they are in Community, but they are only in proximity. True community requires commitment and openness. It is a willingness to extend yourself to encounter and know the other."

Although it isn't easy work, I believe that as Managing director at GCCRC it is an important part of my role to model this kind of openness and to extend myself, in the hopes others will join in so that we can have a foundation that will support the ongoing growth of the camp.

Mark asks Paul: You've also arrived at this congregation during the pandemic. What has it been like trying to maintain community at St. Giles in the past year?

Paul responds: First of all, I am truly thankful that God has called me to serve in this congregation. St. Giles has surprisingly held up well during the pandemic. People have really made Daisy and I feel welcome to this community of faith.

Even prior to my arrival, the congregation already exhibited a tendency to meet and worship in-person, to the extent that is permitted by the Ottawa Public Health. This is easier said than done, as many of the folks here would be considered as having a higher risk of developing severe infection should someone catches COVID. Nevertheless, there is a core group of coworkers that soldiers on in faith. In my observation, they really seem to like each other, enjoy each other's presence, and appreciate each person's contribution to the whole. Even during the loneliest time when worship could only be attended by 10 persons or less, we kept the sanctuary door open, set up a rotation for people to attend in-person.

The congregation has also done a great job in making sure people are connected, by telephone, teleconference, Zoom, YouTube and whatever means technology enables us. I have to tell you the first time I attended the weekly Coffee Hour on Monday morning, via teleconference, I was completely lost. I had only met a few briefly, did not know most of them by name, and could not recognize their voices. But overtime, I got used to that platform. My ears became accustomed to distinctive voice patterns of participants—their faces begin to surface in my head when they speak. It has become as if I am in the same room with those who phone into the teleconference. People really seem to enjoy that virtual Coffee Hour on Monday, that we have kept it going even after the real, in-person Coffee Hour has resumed after Sunday worship services. It demonstrates a real resiliency to this congregation.

I once heard a sermon preached during the pandemic, by the Rev. Dr. Roland De Vries, the Principal of the Presbyterian College. He described the community of faith by evoking the imagery of a hearth, the gathering

space for a family before a fireplace. Somewhere deep inside every one of us, there is a hearth, where we are drawn to the smell of woodsmoke and to the sound of those we love. The challenge for each congregation, each community of faith, during the pandemic and afterwards, is to identify where that hearth is, and to build and foster that collective hearth even if we are not able to be physically present. I am thankful to that message, and have kept that in my heart as I serve the congregation.

Paul asks Mark: Apostle Paul talks about being thankful for the Roman church. How can being thankful help us stay connected as a community?

Mark responds: Paul is led by his thankfulness for the church in Rome. His thankfulness is what fuels the gratitude he expresses to God for them and it motivates his heart to pray for them earnestly.

I did a google search to see why being thankful is important and one of the results that stood out to me was based on positive psychology research from Harvard University. It said that “gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness. Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity and build strong relationships.”

The Oxford dictionary defines Thankfulness as “the feeling of being grateful”. So the way that I see it is that just feeling something and keeping it to myself doesn’t do anything for anyone but me, while expressing it in showing gratitude to others in word or deed and praying with and/or for others connects us to community.

We start to turn our attention from being inwardly “me-centred” to being outward and upward facing and that reflects God’s love to our community.

Mark asks Paul: What do you see as Apostle Paul’s point in writing this letter to the Romans?

Paul responds: As far as we know, Apostle Paul wrote this letter during his third missionary journey, about 20 years after his conversion. It is the 6th letter of his, in order of writing. At this point, Paul has spent most of his time in cities along the northern coast of the Mediterranean and around the

Aegean Sea. Paul doesn't know the believers in Rome, and we don't really know who brought the Good News of Jesus Christ to the congregation that is gathered in Rome. It seems that Paul had planned to go to Rome previously, but hasn't been able to. So he sends them this letter, thorough grounded in theology, to sort of 'tide them over' until he comes.

Many of us over the past 2 years can relate to having plans to travel disrupted or changed. As we have had to do, Paul also makes do with the technology at his disposal to send his words to Rome, since he could not be there in person. But he is pretty clear that this letter is not sufficient to replace his presence, and he will come so they may be "mutually encouraged by each other's faith."

The beautiful thing about Paul's situation is that while he is frustrated by not being able to travel, this letter to the Romans may never have existed in its current form if his earlier attempts to travel had been successful. This should bring us some comforts, knowing that our frustrations over being apart during the pandemic may have been opportunities for God to shake things loose a bit, and to put things in place that wouldn't have existed otherwise.

Paul asks Mark: Apostle Paul is eager to preach the gospel to those in Rome. What are you eager about for this year at camp?

Mark Responds: The short answer is that I am eager to finally get to do ALL of my job, although I have enjoyed the first two summers, I am certainly excited to be able to work at a camp that has camps.

The longer version of the answer is that I believe that we have a lot of positive momentum going on. We have seen a number of improvements being made to some of our facilities, and I am looking forward to seeing that continue. I am eager for the deepening of relationships with the community of people who spend time at GCCRC each year, both with those who come for a day and those who come for the whole summer. I am excited to see growth and development of the leadership skills of our summer staff team... assuming that they get their applications submitted. I am eager for our 60th anniversary celebrations and to continue the work we have been doing to build our programming for all ages to be able to

facilitate growth in our community members and our partner organizations. I am excited to implement the communications tools that we are working on to try to spread the word about the beautiful gem that is our camp. If it's not too tacky to mention, I am excited about the financial direction that we are heading in and the way that our donors continue to support the work of the camp. Last but not least, I share Paul's eagerness to preach and I am so excited for when we are again able to gather together at the chapel on Sunday mornings.

Mark asks Paul: The letter from Jeremiah that was read earlier was sent to the exiles in Babylon as a form of encouragement. What words of encouragement do you have for people at St. Giles looking forward to reconnecting with their community of faith?

Paul responds: These words of the prophet make clear to the community of faith that God has a plan, always. Even when the Israelites were driven out from their land, due in large part to their own failings, God had already set in motion a plan to bring them back. Their sufferings were to be limited, as the Lord proclaimed through the prophet in verse 11, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." The word 'welfare' in this verse is actually '*shalom*' in Hebrew—a word we know well. That is what God offers to the community of faith—welfare, peace, completeness, and wholeness.

That is also my prayer for the people of St. Giles. The church is reopening, certain activities and ministries are now fully in-person, including choir, children Sunday school, and Coffee Hour after worship. Next Sunday, we are celebrating the 97th Anniversary of St. Giles. You should be receiving a formal letter of invitation by mail soon. Later this month, on the Saturday of May 28, the congregation will also take part in the Great Glebe Garage Sale. I have heard so much about it, but have yet to see one live, so I am really looking forward to that. We will continue to make Zoom and teleconference available during worship services, for the foreseeable future. But of course, we do invite you to join us in-person, when you are ready and when you feel comfortable enough.

God promised through Jeremiah in verse 13, "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me."

My hope for St. Giles is this: together as a community of faith, we will seek the Lord with all our heart. We trust that God has a plan for the congregation, a plan for a future with hope. So we invite all of you to join us, and experience what God is doing in our midst.

Paul asks Mark: What hopes or encouragement do you have for people as they look at returning to Gracefield this summer?

Mark Responds: It might be too simplistic, but I hope that you'll come, I hope that you will invite your families, friends and neighbours to join you too. Our curriculum this summer for our Children & Youth programs is called "Creation Speaks", and although there are many places in this country that are beautiful, I think that our camp is a very fitting location for the subject.

I'll wrap up with Paul's words in Romans 1:11-12 from the FNV of the NT

For I long to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift so that you may be strengthened—or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.