

18 October 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

Today we mark the 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Elmwood Avenue Church. Had we been celebrating under a kinder, gentler regime, we'd have gathered in Fleck Hall to share a grand meal, tell stories of the past, and make a toast or two. It would have been a fitting time, at long last, to thank to Lorraine Clark for her years of sterling service at the organ bench, and to welcome Angus Sinclair, her worthy successor.

None of that is to be. Covid clouds our calendar now.

But it need not stop us from saying and meaning, alone or together, some words of Dag Hammarskjöld. He was a Swedish diplomat, a quietly religious man who became Secretary-General of the United Nations in the middle of the last century. He died in a plane crash in 1961 on his way to peace talks in Zambia, then called 'Northern Rhodesia'.

These are the words he jotted in his journal one night: "For all that has been, Thanks. For all that shall be, Yes."

### **Real Presence**

I wonder if those words could be our fitting response to God, not just at the day's end, and not only at any kind of anniversary, even the sad ones, but at that other 'grand meal' we used to share in the sanctuary. Don't they describe our 'posture' at every celebration of Holy Communion? "For all that has been, Thanks. To all that shall be, Yes."

Holy Communion nourishes the human spirit by imparting God's Real Presence in a humble, earthy way. A simple, symbolic supper lies at the heart of it, however grandly it's performed: bread broken and wine out-poured, shared at one table. It's the one true altar at which we give ourselves over to God, only to receive ourselves back again as the gift of One who gave himself for us.

Something deep, deep within in us longs for this symbolic exchange with God's Real Presence. We deeply desire an 'Other' who will not smother us, but befriend, forgive, and feed us, and cause us to flourish forever. Faith is this desire's awakening.

Months ago, I received one of those 'multi-recipient' e-mails from a colleague. Covid was, by then, as embedded as a squatter who'd installed

himself for the long haul. Church doors were locked. Ministers were seeking each other out, wondering how we could carry on our work. Could we worship God on-line? Was that even possible?

My colleague's email began with the fragment of a question. "Communion on-line?" Then this: "I have been asked to consider doing the Communion liturgy during our Easter service on Zoom and have viewers have their own wine/juice and bread on their own table. What are your thoughts?"

I sat back in my chair, staring at the screen (that's a posture too). My instincts said, "No, that's impossible." So, I questioned my instincts. Sometimes they're wrong. But my thoughts, seasoned by many years of reading and thinking, and tested against experience, returned again and again to the theme of God's Presence.

How could God's Presence be real apart from *our* real presence at this shared meal we call Holy Communion? And how could our meal be shared if we did not bring our physical bodies into the same physical space, breathe the same air, and share the same food and drink at the same table?

"No," I said. "I don't think Holy Communion can be celebrated on-line any more than a game of rugby can be played on-line. That wouldn't be Holy Communion and it wouldn't be rugby. Neither can you blow out candles on a birthday cake on-line, cut it in pieces and share it. How, then, can you break the bread of Holy Communion and share it on Zoom? You can't."

Unfortunately, I hit 'reply all'. I was quickly shot down by the other recipients. (That's clergy for you.) Their replies answering, not *whether*, but *how* a 'Zoom Communion' should be 'done'. Their answers were practical, not philosophical. I should have known better. People are eager to answer 'how' but reluctant to ask 'why'. And they rarely want to hear from those who do.

But my colleagues and I share the same leaky boat, and we're moved by the same desire to serve. We feel a special responsibility to 'solve' the problems Covid has dumped on a fragile Church. We're hounded by a common fear too. We fear, rightly, that after months of absence, people will drift away, never to return. That always hits a nerve with us. How can it not?

Their quarrel with me is a philosophical one, though I can't get them to see it that way. They're eager to shift the Church's life on on-line. They fear a loss of public interest if they don't. Those who believe they're 'progressive' call me a dinosaur. "Hey, Geezer! On-line presence is the future! Get with it!"

## All the World's a Stage

The world of theatre is having a similar battle. The pandemic locked them out too, rather as the plague shuttered the theatres in Shakespeare's day. Their fears feel all too familiar to me. They fear going out of business. By way of response, there has been an out-pouring of 'innovation' by actors, playwrights, and theatre directors. Zoom performances abound, and more.

Many are thrilled. This portends the 'brave new world' of theatre, they say. They insist it's a great leap forward for audience members, too, unless of course, they're 'dinosaurs'. "*Finally*, audiences are liberated from sitting in rows, or made to 'shush' when the house lights go down," they say.

But others say, "Well, full marks for trying, but that ain't theatre." A theatre critic for the *New York Times* wrote this: "Physical presence is part of the essence of theatre; so is occupying a common space." I'd say just the same about worship. It's an activity. If you're not there, you're not doing it, unless doing it alone. Don't kid yourself.

Another theatre critic, who writes on-line under a pseudonym, 'Nicholas Berger', pinpointed the central issue: "The coronavirus is so insidious because it attacks one of the central yearnings of human nature, which just so happens to be the bedrock theatre is built on: our desire to assemble. Theatre must not only be experienced live, but also, and just as importantly, together."

He also pinpoints the unacknowledged pain our inability to gather creates in us, our ineffective attempts to assuage it, and our unwillingness to feel it.

"You see this starved desire for assembly in our willingness to post a photo of ourselves as a part of a big Brady Brunch enclave of Zoom squares, grasping at some sense of togetherness, but only underlining our own deep isolation. We are not together, but maybe if we present a portrait of inclusion and assembly we will be? This contradiction cuts to the great lie at the center of social media: if we perform a truth, it will materialize. If I look like I'm enjoying my day at the beach, or my college reunion, or my relationship, maybe I will. Our devotion to our devices foregrounds their promise of connectivity, but also disappointingly reveals how they have come up short in realizing that promise."

I agree. This is how social media turns into idolatry: when it's deployed in regions it does not belong but endeavours to colonise.

But how then are we to live with this fear, this pain? Berger's advice almost sounds Biblical.

“We must lean into this pain,” he says. “We must feel the grief. We must mourn. Mourn the loss of work, the loss of jobs, the loss of money, the loss of life. Mourn the temporary loss of an art form that demands assembly. Lean into the grief. Lean in. Lean in. Lean in. We must remind ourselves that mourning is a human act, not a digital one. It is only in this acknowledgment that we will survive. The internet isn’t going to save us, we are.”

The parallels with the ‘Church world’ are palpable but not perfect. For one thing, I would say ‘God will save us’, not we ourselves. But Berger has burrowed beneath the surface to ask the ‘philosophical’ question. And he’s dead right.

If we dare to ask ‘why’, we’ll trace our many fears and anxieties to their source. And we’ll find it’s our unwillingness to mourn, to bear the burdens of grief, and to accept the loss that no technology can fix. Perhaps Covid is our chance to do *that*, to mourn.

Holy Communion was never a technological fix. It is the nourishment of God’s real presence, which is grace ‘to lean in’ and bear life’s grief, toil, and sorrow. That way lie healing and joy.

Here’s Berger again, but with my little insertions: “When the bans are lifted, our gaze will divert from our screens in an act of quiet liberation. We come to the theatre [Church] to see a part of ourselves reflected back, to feel seen, to recognize that we exist in a community. When the world rebounds and we push our heads out from the rubble, and there will be rubble, we will seek each other out with a renewed sense of gratitude. We will be reminded of our invisible, indispensable need for each other [and God] and we will return to the theatre [Church] to celebrate, to mourn, and to heal.”

Then, surely, we’ll have reason to say with all our hearts, “For all that has been, Thanks. For all that shall be, Yes.”

### **Bazaar Stuff**

The Bazaar is ‘going virtual’ this year. Yes, I know, I just saw the irony too. Items will be sold throughout this month and next. But turkey meat pies are available now. The cost is \$3.50 each. To order yours, call the Church Office (519-438-3492), or email ([contact@elmwoodchurch.ca](mailto:contact@elmwoodchurch.ca))

Yours in the faith,  
Andrew