Love to Joy

Easter 6, May 9, 2021

Acts 10: 34-48

John 15: 9-17

You may have heard of the CBC project, [Black on the Prairies](https://www.cbc.ca/newsinteractives/features/black-on-the-prairies). It is a collection of stories and experiences of black people who have lived on the prairies through the themes of Migration, Putting in Work, Black and Indigenous Relations, Politics and Resistance, and Black to the Future. In the Migration section there is a group of [Reflections](https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/black-on-the-prairies-15-reflections-1.5984661) on Black Prairie life, of 15 individuals sharing their experiences. Lindiwe Mpofu of Saskatoon shares:

I think Black life on the Prairies in the future will look a lot more like freedom. Freedom to exist fully in this part of the world, freedom to own the air that we breathe, to own the ground that we stand on, to own our existence. I think the more that happens, the more Blackness in the Prairies transforms. I also think that the more stories are told of what Blackness on the Prairies has looked like in the past, the more we know those stories, the more we'll be connected to this land and connected to those that came before us and just find our way.

I often find in my interactions with Black people on the Prairies, most of the time there's an unease about doing life here. It's almost as if people still, on some level of consciousness, are asking for permission just to be, just to exist here.

I wonder if this kind of experience, reflects how Cornelius might have felt in our scripture reading from Acts today? As a Roman soldier of faith, often called upon to persecute the Jewish and Christian communities, how did he find community and freedom? Did he feel like he needed permission to be honest about who he was, looking for acceptance? Then along came this vision to call for Peter.

Cornelius was described as a devout man who feared God with all his household (Acts 10:2). Now it is helpful to know that often when the Bible talks about fearing God the original text is closer to our understanding of awe, rather than our present understanding of fear. So, Cornelius, then has a vision in which an angel appears to him and tells him to send people to Joppa for a man named Simon who is called Peter. Around noon, the next day, Peter has a vision, of a massive sheet filled with animals, which in his tradition were considered unclean and a voice tells him to get up, kill and eat. Peter refuses saying he will not eat what is unclean and the voice tells him ‘what God has made clean you must not call profane’. After this happened three times, the vision ended, and as Peter puzzled over it’s meaning, Cornelius’ men came to his door. Cornelius was a Gentile and according to the Jewish tradition was considered unclean. So as the story transpired, Peter would have felt challenged about going to this Gentile city, to see a Roman soldier, who was not only a gentile but also may be viewed as an enemy of this Jesus movement. Even as he realized God’s impartiality and message of generous welcome to the gentiles into the fold, Peter would have been anxious about the implications of expanding the church to include all Gentiles. God’s message was clear through the visions, as well as the Holy Spirit, coming upon all who heard the Good News that Peter offered, to the whole household of Gentiles. This was before they were baptized and was a sign that there is nothing to prevent them from being baptized. God’s loving power was present and expanding the church.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus’ message was preparing the disciples for these kinds of encounters. Jesus wanted them to remember how he loves them and for them to love others in the same way. This would be the driving force behind the challenging interactions with those they might otherwise not have any contact with, like the Ethiopian Eunich from last weeks reading and Cornelius from todays story. Jesus let them know that they are no longer servants but friends, because he has shared with them everything he knows from God. Friends lay down their life for their friends. This can be viewed as taking risks on behalf of our friends and those we care about, even those we don’t know. As we witnessed people of all races participating in Black Lives Matter protests this past year, many did so at risk to themselves, including non-racialized people. This also happened during the civil rights movement when Martin Luther King Jr. and the movement was marching on Selma. Many joined from a variety of faiths, including white folk, knowing that there would likely be violence from the authorities as they crossed the bridge. This is one example of laying down one’s life for your friends.

As we celebrate mothers’ day and honour mothers in our lives with whom we have had a loving relationship, we also acknowledge that was not the case for some. Many of us can think of the ways that our mothers or those who mothered us, gave of their love sacrificially. If you were poor, how often did you get food and more of it than your mother did? The sacrificial love doesn’t need to be big things but can be an accumulation of a lot of little things too. Preparing meals for the family day in and day out, and a big special meal on Sundays; doing laundry every week; keeping house in general, just to name a few things, and often keeping on top of all of this, while working outside the home. There is no greater love, than giving of our lives for others.

Jesus also said that he tells us these things so that his joy may be in us and our joy may be complete. I think this is one of the most beautiful sayings in the Bible. Jesus shares these things – abide in my love, love one another, so that we may have joy. When we love one another, and experience that love from and with one another, then we will know abundant joy. When have you experienced this love, this kind of abundant joy? It is truly a blessing when we do.

It is this kind of love, that Peter had known and was sharing with Cornelius in their encounter.

It was this kind of love that lend to the expansion of the church to include the Gentiles.

It was this kind of love that enabled Peter to overcome his fears and anxieties of the implications of expanding the church to the Gentiles.

It is this kind of love that will lead us to reaching out to those who need to feel welcome in our community.

It is this kind of love which will lead us to explore how we need to change to extend that welcome.

It is this kind of love that will bless us with truly living out what it means to be an inclusive community, regardless of gender, gender identity, sexual identity, racial identity, abilities, or economic status.

It is this kind of love that will embody Christ, and bring joy.

May we embody Christ’s love, love one another, that our joy may be complete. May we know and live out God’s impartiality, and truly work to create a community that is multi-cultural, respectful and loving of all creation, in all its’ diversity.