**Practice Presence in Place**

April 30, 2023, Easter 4

Acts 2: 42-47 Russell Mitchell-Walker

John 10: 1-10

Last weekend I was in Seattle for the Inhabit conference, offered by the Parish Collective, which is all about how we be church rooted in the place we are, the neighbourhood. Their tagline is “Practice, Presence, Place”. It’s a practice of being present in the place where we live and work. It is a gathering filled with stories of people’s experiences of this practice, and I will be sharing some of them with you today. Gino Haynes is in the Shorb Neighbourhood in Canton, Ohio. It is a suburb that transitioned from a community redlined – where people were denied loans, mortgages and services based on their race – to a community of African-American, Greek, and Latinos. The members of the community have the lowest wages in the state and only 20% own their homes. The quality of homes is poor and there is a low life expectancy. However, people tell a better story than the statistics, says Gino. They are developing a community within a community, helping people get into home ownership through [renovating apartments](https://www.cantonrep.com/story/news/local/canton/2023/02/09/shorb-area-revitalization-efforts-in-full-swing-canton-for-all-people/69838627007/). They are working to create a mixed economy and diversity of people of all income levels working together. Through a food swap program, they developed together, they are feeding 1/10th of the city. He says, what appears to be dilapidated is God’s tapestry.

Gino and his neighbourhood of Shorb are living out some of what we hear in Acts 2, the sharing of goods in common through the food swap and helping people own their own homes. The resurrected Christ and the Holy Spirit transformed the early church community to a rapidly growing number of faithful who were baptized and sold all that they had, providing it to a common pool, so everyone had what they needed. They gathered together regularly for fellowship, prayers, teaching by the apostles and the breaking of bread. The breaking of bread would sometimes be communion, and other times a meal together, most often in people’s homes.

In the gospel reading, it is important to note that this description of Jesus as the gate to the sheepfold and as shepherd is in response to the healing of the man born blind that the religious authorities questioned, challenged and criticized. Jesus describing himself as the gate is an offering of salvation – salvation to the man born blind who will no longer experience marginalization and isolation. Just as the sheep are offered pasture and protection by the shepherd, so the blind man will now know sustenance and security. Just like the early church community in Acts 2. In this gospel reading, Jesus is indicating to the community that salvation is present, not just after we die, in eternal life, but in the present life, in inhabiting the neighbourhood, the world to have life in all its abundance.

I invite us to hear some stories from the conference of inhabiting the neighbourhood through the elements of life named in Acts: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread together, and prayers or worship.

Teaching: I went to a workshop about [Strong Towns](strongtowns.org), Strong Parishes by Norm Van Eeden Peterson of Delta BC, and John Pattison of Seattle. John is also author of the book Slow Church, Cultivating Community in the Patient way of Jesus. Strong Towns is an advocacy organization using media to help promote prosperity and solvency that is equitable and trying to make changes to stop the bleeding of money and change the built environment. They say we have impoverished our spaces in the way we have laid out our spaces and designed neighbourhoods. For example our neighborhood around us here is designed such that we have to drive pretty much anywhere to get what we need or want. John says we need to right size our neighbourhood from the bottom up. It encourages folk to find out what is needed and take action to make it happen. They identify a four step process for change making.

1. Humbly observe where people are struggling.
2. Ask what is the thing that will address the problem.
3. Act. Do that thing.
4. Repeat.

An example they gave was a community in Charlotte NC, identified a problem that there was a lack of shelters and benches at bus stops. A group started building benches and put them at the bus stops. The city told them to stop, to which they said, OK, if you do something about it. The city wouldn’t so they kept building and installing benches and a community need was met. What do you observe as struggles in your neighbourhood and what could address it?

Fellowship. Lamont Hartman from Grande Community in Orange County California told of his experience moving into a neighbourhood he describes as mutual flourishing among ethnically and generationally diverse folk but laments the neighbourhood doesn’t feel seen and heard. It is largely working poor, Vietnamese, with later additions of Hispanic and Caucasian. Lamont had gone through a messy divorce and was avoiding dealing with it. He said yes to the Spirit leading him to work at Grande Community without knowing anything about it. He learned about how we don’t heal in isolation, we heal in community. One day he was playing soccer with a 5 year old he had come to know named Neo. Neo asked him, where is your kid’s mother? Lamont, still avoiding his pain of the divorce kicked the ball as far as he could. But he learned the message of Jesus, let the children come to me. As later, Neo took him home to his family, and they invited Lamont to stay for supper. Neo’s father tells him how much Neo talks about Lamont and how much he likes him. He then tells Lamont about his divorce, which enables Lamont to share his story too. The father asks for prayer and healing begins for all as prayer and stories are shared. Lamont concludes, because a five year old walked a broken pastor into community, he was opened to be vulnerable and healing was able to take place through that fellowship.

Breaking Bread. Naphtali Renshaw is from the Belonging Space United Methodist Church in Eugene Oregon. They have worked at building relationships with the LGBTQ community, the local NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, and Indigenous Communities in their area. She talked about connecting with a local Native Centre, that is one hour away from one of the last residential schools still running in the States. She said when building relationships, you work at the speed of trust. At one point they offered to prepare a meal for people at the Native centre, and eventually the centre agreed. On the evening the meal was offered, and they had broken bread together, an elder said to her, “no one’s ever cooked a meal for us before. In our culture it is the highest honour”. Naphtali concludes that we never know how such a simple thing, like providing a meal, can build significant relationships.

Prayers and worship. There was wonderful music at Inhabit, which was worship. Yvonne Araujo-Schact shared a powerful story of her experience growing up in Russia, where you were not allowed to be Christian. Her mother and father were uneducated because in order to go to university you had to declare that you did not believe in God and they would not do that. She still felt blessed and there was grace. She lived in Ukraine as well and presently has family in Russia and Ukraine, and in the midst of the war, and the realities for her, she finds grace. She now lives in San Diego, and sang a beautiful song with composer and singer Tom Wuest, Everywhere you Look, Grace Lives. In the midst of pain, suffering, and challenge, we can still experience God’s grace. That is a living prayer.

Jesus tells us that a shepherd knows each of his sheep by name and when he calls them, they follow, they know to come. This is important as there are often many sheep from different shepherds in the sheepfold, so to be able to call them by name and have your sheep come is very helpful. Knowing the sheep by name is to lead them to safety, loving them individually. One very simple and practical suggestion I bring back from this Inhabit conference is to get to know your neighbours in a one block radius. I invite you; no, I commission you to get to know the people in your one block radius of your house or 10 units if your are in a building, if you don’t already know them. I have been meaning to get out into the area to drop Community Dinner postcards into the neighbourhood but never got around to it. Maybe if I just do the immediate neighbours, on the adjoining street and property, it will get done. Take time to get to know the names and stories of your neighbours and it may bring people together you never may have connected with. Stephen Rathjen, who lives in the downtown Eastside neighbourhood in Vancouver (Canada’s poorest postal code) tells the story of getting to know his neighbour who, whenever Stephen was working outside in his front yard his neighbour would come over to see what he was doing. Inevitably, he would have a tool to help with it, would go home and get it and they would work together. Some jobs he ended up bringing his own bobcat and helping them out or even doing the job himself. Stephen reflects that if he hadn’t been open to getting to know his neighbour, he as a gay man, who had little in common with this burly tradesman, would have never connected but they now enjoy each other’s company and appreciate working together on projects as neighbours.

May you be blessed with getting to know your neighbours and learning about their joys and struggles. May we continue to find ways to teach, pray, share fellowship and break bread together with our neighbours as a church community. May we find salvation through inhabiting our place, and practicing presence where we live and in this surrounding community where we worship.