**Belonging in the Neighbourhood**

May 8, 2022 Easter 4

Acts 9: 36-43 Russell Mitchell-Walker

John 10: 22-30

Last week I went to Seattle for the Inhabit Conference. Inhabit is organized by the Parish Collective, which is the same group from which I took the Leadership in the New Parish course. It is about how we be church in the neighbourhood and reclaiming the idea of Parish. It used to be that churches were defined by parish boundaries, and that was the area they served. Liz Clutterbuck from Holloway, North London, is in such a parish, of [Emmanuel Hollaway](https://www.emmanueln7.com/) of the Church of England. It is a small area that they are legally required to serve, along with 99 other churches within 2.4 miles. Our parish, would be generally, Arcola East and more specifically Wood Meadows, University Park and Gardiner Park. Parish Ministry invites us to be open to where the Spirit is already active and at work in the neighbourhood and join in. An example of this is Glen Elm School, where the teachers were providing lunch and snack food for children who had none. We joined in by developing Munch Lunch to make lunches with Glen Elm students and LSC volunteers. While this ended with the Pandemic, and the funding ran out, the need is still there as we continue to collect food for Glen Elm.

Jonathan Brooks, chair of the Parish Collective Board, who a number of you know of through reading his book [Church Forsaken](https://pastahj.com/books), outlined a model of Five Signs of the Parish Movement. As I name these I invite you to reflect on how you think we are doing in each of these areas:

1. Centering on Christ - We seek to center our lives on Christ as a collective expression of the love of God in our place.
2. Inhabiting our Parish - We actively inhabit our neighborhood, joining the liberation story of God in, with, and for our place and its inhabitants.
3. Gathering to Remember - We gather to weave our parish into the larger story of our faith and remember the massive story of God.
4. Collaborating for Renewal with God - We trust God will invite us to weave new relationships and projects for the common good in our shared common ground.
5. Linking Across - Committed and compelled to growing unity-in-difference we actively connect across parishes to celebrate and grow together from unique local expressions of the church outside our own.

It is all about being with people where they are and celebrating God’s love and action in the community. It is about community and belonging

This is what part of today’s scripture is about. In the gospel of John, while the text says the Jews, it is important to note that it is the Judean Authorities, the religious leaders who are asking the question of Jesus, whether he is the messiah. Jesus indicates that he has told them and demonstrated by his works and the works of God, but they do not believe. The text says they don’t belong to his sheep, his flock. Now this does not mean that they can’t belong, they don’t belong because they choose not to listen, they choose not to see, or believe. They only believe their understanding of the law and are not willing sway from it, which excludes them from the love of God in Jesus. Jesus is about love of neighbour, of others. All belong to God’s flock, all are welcome and included. It is the same in the neighbourhood, all are part of God’s love, regardless of who they are, or even what faith they are a part of.

In the story from Acts, Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, had died and people from her community went to get Peter. The story indicates that she did much good works and charity and supported a community of widows. She was much loved by the community and was a church leader, a deacon. Peter raised her from the dead and the community was overjoyed, and many more believed. Dorcas was an example of loving the community and those in the neighbourhood - the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized. We are called to love the community and join in that caring in the same way.

There were many examples of this at the Inhabit Conference. A large part of the experience of Inhabit is hearing stories of Parish ministry in action. I wish to share a few. Erin Grant Oxford is pastor of [The Dale Ministries](https://www.thedale.org/) in Toronto which offers a community without walls, meaning that everything they do is in partnership with others. During the Pandemic, everything they did had to be outside, which primarily ended up being their food ministry. Erin says that “when they were permanently housed people had to go inside to find us. Now we go outside to find our people and it is where they know to look for us. It matters that we get rained and snowed on together, that we can share a snack in the park, that we can slow down and linger for chats anywhere along the street, that we can grow things in our community garden plot. We move from observation of the neighbourhood to participation in it.”

Bryan Ward shared about his neighbourhood of Hamelin/Midway in St. Paul Minnesota. When the pandemic hit, people in the late afternoon began sitting outside on their front yards for a drink. It evolved into a happy hour. One day they heard the neighbours in a jazz band practicing inside and invited them to come out and practice outside. It became part of the gathering and morphed at one point to a happy hour, house church, jazz night. Their neighbourhood was three blocks away from where George Floyd was murdered and the protests in the following days. On day three, when tear gas was released, chaos ensued and three buildings were burned down. The neighbours gathered together in their diversity and cleaned the streets and the buildings, and local clergy came together to lead a prayer service for healing. Bryan says healing happens in the streets and quoted Isaiah 58: 12, “you shall be a repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets to live in.”

[Majora Carter](https://www.amazon.com/Reclaiming-Your-Community-Neighborhood-Better/dp/1523000295) lives in the South Bronx and wrote the book Reclaiming Your Community: You don’t have to Move out of Your Neighbourhood to Live in a Better One. She invited Cote Soerens to share her experience of improving their neighbourhood. Cote initiated and manages a local coffee shop called [Resistancia](https://www.resistenciacoffee.com/), which was just starting when I was taking the course Leadership in the New Parish and we visited it. They have been operating for almost four years now, and from the beginning had a strong connection with the neighbourhood of South Park in Seattle where Tim and Cote live. (Tim is one of the authors of The New Parish and a founder of the Parish Collective). Cote told us at Inhabit about the relationship they had developed with the tenant upstairs who ran a daycare. One day they learned that she had been evicted – they did not have a very good landlord. He didn’t understand their vision. Cote decided to begin a prayer and invited others to pray as well. It wasn’t a specific prayer but a general prayer that God would free the land for the people. She wondered if there was organizational capacity to intervene with how property is liquidated. As part of this they decided to work toward buying the property and applied to a Strategic Investment Fund from the City of Seattle. That week of the conference, they had just been informed that they were successful and were granted $2.3 million toward buying the whole property AND received the balance of $3.5 million from an anonymous donor. Cote concluded with “God is doing it!”

My final example is of [Shannan Martin](http://www.shannanmartinwrites.com/) of Goshen, Indiana, writer and author of a few books including the ministry of ordinary places. She shared about walking to a church meeting in her neighbourhood one hot summer night. She was walking down a laneway that she had walked hundreds of times before when a man came out of his back yard and began talking with her about the hot night and the sounds of the cicadas. She said this talk about the weather was anything but small talk as he edged her toward his yard and beautiful garden of flowers. She said this interaction was 10 years in the making, they had seen her walk her children to school (children who are now almost adults). They had seen each other for many years, but this night, she learned their names. She says we need to recognize Christ as neighbour in our midst. Her story is an example of the importance of long term presence in a neighbourhood and that building relationships takes time. I also went to a workshop she was a part of and she said that we should not invite anyone to church if they haven’t been at our table in our home.

We are invited to consider ways we can help people know they belong, that they are loved by God and beloved. Jesus says he knows each of his sheep by name. May we take the time to know the names of our neighbours, to learn where God is at work, and join in. May we be present and attentive to our community, not just focusing our church, but on how we can be in relationship with one another, wherever we are, that we may be open to the Spirit and live out God’s love.