

Today is Conference Sunday. The theme of Conference this year is "Gathering Spirits, Building Relationships". Our Conference Annual Meeting has been conducted with this theme in mind all weekend. The scriptures chosen for this Sunday are around family matters such as taking care of the most vulnerable members of the family, as well as having a resting place in Jesus.

I write this reflection at the end of a long week and a half of taking care of "relatives". Not just relatives, but also friends and neighbours and people who I've never met before. One day last week I spent the morning preparing food to feed the masses and then spent the afternoon filling sandbags that would be used against the onslaught of water about to hit my home community of Borden. As I, along with many others, filled sandbags, I marveled at our young people who had worked all day and well into the evening filling sandbags, tying sand bags and moving sandbags on and off pallets and trucks. I marveled at the people who worked to the wee hours of the morning the day before, caught a few hours of sleep and went back at it in the morning. And I marveled at the folks from other communities all around us who had come to pitch in, the folks who were driving by and stopped to help, the people who came to help just because they saw on facebook that help was needed, and the youth groups from other towns who had organized themselves to come to help fill bags in preparation for what is to come. Even the youngest in our school helped by making signs thanking the volunteers for their efforts. These signs were laminated and placed on the tables in the town hall where the volunteers came to eat and drink and rest up a bit before they went back at it.

I was overwhelmed by the generosity, the kindness, the industriousness and the hospitality of our community and of the communities from all around us who rallied around and did their bit for the effort against the flood waters. I couldn't help but notice how God was at work in all of us – caring for each other, friends and strangers alike,

- working together to help the most vulnerable first whether they had a big fancy house or a small humble one,

- keeping our spirits and good humour up throughout it all.

It never fails to amaze me that when disaster strikes, help comes in many ways. When we are in trouble, people come from everywhere to help.

Jesus called us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, not just in emergencies, but every day. Our scriptures today call us to take care of the widow – in other words, the most vulnerable.

I believe that the reason communities come together as they do in times of tragedy or disaster is because of the work that they do every day in building and maintaining the relationships they

have with each other. Relationships are built on trust and faith. When those relationships break down, trust is lost and forgiveness has to take place for the relationship to mend.

Our weekend at Conference is one of conducting the business of our church and as we do that we try to build relationships – with each other, with the community that we are in, with other church denominations and other cultures. It is important to build relationships with all our relations – friends, neighbours, communities, other churches and other cultures. It is only in building a relationship that we will be able to pull together if there is a disaster or tragedy.

Jesus told us that the first great commandment is “... you shall love the Lord your God with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mk 12:29-31 NRSV) Jesus goes on to tell us that when we know this in our hearts we won’t be “far from the kingdom of God” (Mk 12:34 NRSV).

All the volunteers who filled sandbags were so important to the work of crews trying to divert the flow of water. But all the volunteers who fed those crews were equally important. All the people who donated food, prepared and served the food gave the workers sustenance. But above all, the workers had a place to come to eat, to quench their thirst, to rest. Rest is important in physical work and it is important in spiritual work.

Jesus invites us to come rest with him. From Matt 11:28-30 taken from *The Message* Jesus invites us to “walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythm of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” It is important to rest, to revive, to refresh and renew in order to be able to carry on. Resting with Jesus gives us renewal and help with the burdens we carry in whatever shape or form that those burdens take.

Build a relationship with Jesus and he will show you the way of caring and compassion to build relationships with others.

From *Out of the Ordinary* by Joyce Rupp, page 103, there is a blessing of compassion. Joyce Rupp says, “Compassion holds both beauty and challenge. It is based on the belief that we are united with all beings. Their joy and sorrow is our joy and sorrow because of this deep and intimate connection. To be truly compassionate means to approach another with the nonjudgment and the unconditional love that Jesus had when he met those who were suffering.

Let us pray...

May you approach all other beings with Christ-like compassion, observing them with kindness.
May you let go of all harsh judgments.

May you be aware of the suffering of those around you, and of all those in the cosmos. May
your ears be open to hear their cries of distress.

May you have the courage and wisdom to speak up for those who are wronged, to be a voice
for those who suffer from injustice of any form.

May you be open to receive from others when you are in need. May you be ready to give when
someone needs to receive your gifts.

May you be willing to meet your own suffering. May you do so with deep compassion for
yourself.

May your faith give you strength when you stand beneath the cross of another.

May you always know the shelter of God when you are hurting and in pain. May you trust this
Compassionate Being to protect you and to comfort you. May you be at peace.

Amen.

This is an Aesop's Tale. If possible, have a bundle of sticks there to illustrate the point. Give the kids a chance to try to break the bundle. I would adapt it to suit the age group of your children.

The point of the story is, of course, to stick together and having a good relationship with all of our neighbours will help that. The theme of our Conference meeting this year is building good relationships with our first nations brothers and sisters.

The Bundle of Sticks

An aging farmer lay on his deathbed thinking about the welfare of his family. His three sons could not see eye to eye, they quarreled day and night. What, he worried, would become of his family? He had tried speaking with them about the importance of forgiving and forgetting and living in peace, but they ignored his words and grew more bitter by the day.

Finally, as his strength waned, the old man had an idea. He called his sons to his bedside, asking the eldest to bring a bundle of sticks.

"Now, my sons," he said, "I want you to break this bundle in two."

The first son tried, and then the second, and finally the third. But no matter how hard they tried, they could not break the bundle of sticks.

"Now untie it," said the farmer. Each of you take one and try to break it."

The sticks broke easily in the hands of each of the three sons.

"You are like these sticks, my sons," said the father. "If you stick together, no one and no thing will be able to harm you, but if you quarrel and divide yourselves, your enemies will destroy you."

**June 2, 2013
Conference Sunday**

Call to Worship:

(written by Darrel Reine – President of Saskatchewan Conference)

From the place the morning sun rises,
From the place the evening sun sets,
From the place that brings the cool winds,
From the place that offers us warm rains,
We gather.

**All: We gather as a community of faith,
we gather as justice seekers,
creation lovers, peacemakers,
we gather as people of hope,
and joyful participants in God's love and vision.**

We gather in spirit, calling ourselves to the work of this church, calling us to offer
God praise and to build relationships with all people.

We come to this time of worship to give thanks for all that has been offered.

Opening Prayer:

(written by Darrel Reine – President of Saskatchewan Conference)

God of all nations,
we gather in the greatness of your love.
Our spirits come together in compassion,
seeking truth and reconciliation
and opportunities to build relationships in caring communities.
Be with us now in this time of worship as we pray;
hearing ancient and holy words
and letting the words of wisdom soak deep within our souls.
May we sing the words of our faith
as we give thanks for our elders
and uphold those who have been called into the ministry of this church.
This we pray. Amen

Hymn: VU #409 Morning has broken

Prayer of Confession/Transformation:

(written by Rev. Christa Eidness)

Holy Mystery,

You knit us together in our mothers' wombs and breathe life into us as we are born. You shower us with skill, intelligence, talent, and insight and invite us to love one another as we reach for your dream of a just and harmonious world. But we do not always recognize your gifts in the people around us. There are times we forget that each one of us is a unique child you created and love; and we find that we are capable of causing great pain. Remind us God; remind us that when one of us hurts, we all hurt. Remind us that when one of us flourishes we can all celebrate. Open our hearts and our eyes to see humanity, all living creatures, and the world around us as you see them: filled with potential and deserving of love. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

(Pause for silent reflection)

Assurance of Pardon:

God's transforming love comes to each one of us as a free gift of grace - it is already here for us, surrounding us, infusing us, and simply waiting for us to accept it. **Thanks be to God. Amen**

Theme Time: The bundle of sticks - Aesop

Hymn: VU #575 I'm gonna live so God can use me

Scripture Lessons: First Reading: I Timothy 5:3-8

Gospel: Matthew 11: 28 - 30

Reflection:

Hymn: VU #595 We are pilgrims on a journey

Offering Hymn: VU #537

Prayer of Dedication:

We give thanks, O God, for the many gifts with which we have been blessed and we offer our gifts in return. May these gifts be used in ways to bless those who are in need. Amen

Prayers of the people:

Gracious God, thank you for this day.

We thank you for the bountiful and beautiful creation that we live in.

We thank you for the people who first walked softly on this land and we pray that we may learn from them the practice of respecting and taking care of our mother earth.

We thank you for our ancestors and we pray that we may learn from them that hard work and perseverance is what is needed to get things done.

We pray for this United Church of ours that works for justice and healing,
for the care of strangers and neighbours,
for those isolated and alone,
for those broken by the world,
for those who are mourning.

Generous and loving God, give us grace and wisdom, strength and courage to do your work in the world. Amen

Lord's Prayer

Final Hymn: VU #87 I am the light

Blessing:

May the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit be with us all, this day and always. Amen.

Sung Benediction: VU #649

Walk with me, I will walk with you and build the land that God has planned where love shines through.