

Reflection on the Word: September 30, 2018 James 5:13-20; (Mark 9:38-50)

- Liberals and PCs continue battle over who will govern N.B.
- U.S. President Donald Trump told reporters in New York Wednesday that he rejected a meeting with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau because he does not like Canada's tariffs, NAFTA negotiating style or representative at those negotiations.
- U.S. Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh fends off new accusations of sexual misconduct
- A final report is expected next July that will recommend ways to ensure patient safety in the wake of eight murders by former Ontario nurse Elizabeth Wettlaufer of residents in her care

These are just a few of the past week's headlines that speak to the challenges that surface in our life together as a people ... on both personal/private and public levels.

John Donne once famously said: "No man is an island, entire of itself." And in the words of talk show host Ellen Degeneres: "I am saddened by how people treat one another and how we are so shut off from one another and how we judge one another, when the truth is, we are all one connected thing."

This morning I want to focus on aspects of our life together in the church ... because that is the very essence of what Christianity is all about. What we do here week by week, and not just on Sunday, is at the heart of God's plan for the world.

Many people think of church as an optional aspect of the Christian life. I'm sure you, like me, have heard lots of comments, even from church members, on how their Christian life is just fine without the church. But I would ask: "Who are we as church, or as people of faith, without community?"

Lorene couldn't come to church because she loved her TV preacher and his Bible teaching. Over the years she had contributed thousands of dollars to his TV ministry. And she told the pastor at her local church that if services weren't the same time Sunday as the broadcast of her favorite TV preacher, she would probably attend.. Now Lorene knew all about her TV preacher, about his family, his trips to the Holy Land and his Bible study books. But her TV preacher didn't know her. He never visited her when she was admitted to the hospital. But the pastor of her local church did.

John loved the great outdoors ... hunting, fishing, four-wheeling. He told the church visitor that he worked hard at his job at the mill five days a week, and when the weekends came, he felt he had a right to take off to the camp. Besides, he added, God is everywhere, and he could worship under the trees or standing on the riverbank just as well as he could sitting in a pew.

Similar stories can be repeated hundreds of times by people who find all manner of reason not to come to church.

But then there are stories like the one of the woman I visit who, because of health and mobility issues can no longer get out to church on Sundays. Each time I visit her, she goes to her dresser drawer and pulls out the church envelopes she has filled each week, wanting to make her contribution to the church's life and work. And then, as I prepare to leave, she usually says, "I want you to know that I pray for you and that I pray for the church, every day." Here is a woman who can no longer be physically active or present at Sunday worship ... but she still finds ways to do her part and thereby feels included as a member of the church community.

Personally I can't imagine life without church. For me, church really is "life together." And it is not just a matter of sharing time in the same building, but it is sharing all of life with other people who come to know us and care about us and are aware that as we each experience caring community, we also gain a greater sense of life lived under the watchful care of God.

As we think about this morning's reading from the letter of James, we could say it is about life together in a typical local church. It's about praying, sickness, sin, and confession.

Preacher, Fred Craddock said about this passage, "Everyday needs are addressed in this text. It pictures a community in which people suffer and pray, rejoice and sing, become sick and get well, sin and are forgiven. This picture reflects congregational life as we know it. People looking to the community of faith for help. And the church offering help in ways that are genuinely appropriate and effective."

In her bestselling book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott explains why she makes her son go with her to church. She says, "The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want –purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith... people banding together to work on themselves and for the greater good. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful..."

I like Anne Lamott's description of church... a place where you can find people who are practicing a deep sense of spirituality; where people are sharing their lives together with purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, and joy; where people practice their faith, however imperfectly. And she would also add – a place where, when you get to the end of your rope, they tie a knot and help you hold on.

Getting back to the passage from James, he writes: "Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise." Church is a place where people confess their sins to one another and are restored, where people visit the sick and pray for them, a place where prayer and singing go hand in hand.

Just think of our own faith community. On any given Sunday this sanctuary may contain people who are celebrating a new birth in the family and those who are grieving the loss of one who has died. On one side may be someone who feels his/her life will never be right after divorce. And on the other side is a couple celebrating the anniversary of a long and happy marriage. In one pew there may be the man who, after countless failed attempts to find work, is not sure he believes in God and three pews back another who is fulfilled in his life and testifies daily to the blessings of God. Near the back of the sanctuary is the woman who fears for her life after a diagnosis of cancer, and sitting ahead of her, the one celebrating her fourth anniversary as a cancer survivor.

Life together in the church is certainly a mixture of people at every stage of life. Take any one of these people apart from the community of faith and their life would be so much less. One of the secrets of church is that it is life lived in community ... marked by mutual support and helpfulness, compassionate concern and forgiveness, holding one another in prayer.

Christopher White, a United Church of Canada minister, was the co-author of a book titled *Jacob's Blessing*. In it, he writes about the power of prayer and the blessing of community.

He and his wife Wendy were devastated when, just 24 hours after her birth, their youngest daughter Elizabeth had to have heart surgery. Again at 10 months of age, she required an open heart correction and a kidney repair. Several years later, she was admitted yet another time to Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, for her second open-heart surgery. Chris writes:

"I recall our feelings well. We were a mess. Wendy and I were so frightened. Because of the risk, of course. But also because of a flood of unhappy memories from the last time when things did not, at first, go well.

We settled in for a six to eight hour wait in the surgical waiting room. My best friend Bob was already waiting for us there with cards, a cribbage board, some snacks, and a pile of magazines. We played cards and waited. And waited ...

While our daughter Elizabeth was undergoing her surgery, the worst blizzard of the year hit the Toronto area. But in the middle of it all, something quite wonderful happened, something I call a wonder of faith. All through the day, people from my church, where I was the minister, kept trooping in to the sanctuary ... to pray, to wait with us in spirit, and to lift up Elizabeth to God. All day and into the evening they came, in ones and twos, the church never empty, a candle in the shape of a dove burning on the communion table."

And then Chris White continues, "To be supported in prayer that way was amazing. We were never alone. Prayers were always with us." And it happened that, in just a week, in an amazing recovery, Elizabeth returned home. Her father says, "Do I attribute her amazing recovery simply to the power of prayer? No, I do not. She had one of the best cardiac surgeons, in one of the best children's hospitals, combined with her own amazing strength and determination. But I do believe that her recovery was enhanced by the prayers of our community."

James, in his letter, reminds us that we need to be there for one another. Is anyone in trouble? Pray for them. Is anyone happy? Rejoice with them. Is anyone sick? Hold them in prayer and offer the sacrament of healing. Has anyone sinned? Hear their confession and remind them of their salvation in Jesus Christ. In any and every situation of life, we are called to be there for one another.

Anne Lamott, who I quoted earlier, relates another story about a six year old girl who got lost one day. "The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, 'You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.'"

The church – a place where you feel at home ... where there is a true sense of community and belonging. Of course, our church isn't perfect ... I expect no church is ... but we know what we need to strive for, so that we can say, as writer Ann Lamott was able to say: "And that is why I have stayed so close to (my church) – because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their welcoming voices, I can always find my way home."

As people of the church, I invite you now to join with me in an affirmation of our Christian faith, as we turn to the words of A New Creed, page 918 VU or on the screen. Please stand as you are able.

Hymn: 560, O Master Let Me Walk with Thee