

A few weeks ago I was having lunch with a person whose mission in life is to help people nurture their spirits - through sharing their wealth.

In our conversation my friend lamented the state of *preaching in the church these days*. (*I hope that I wasn't including being included!*) "When I listen to a sermon, I want to hear where the preacher encountered God this week." said my friend.

"I don't want to hear where someone found God in the past; (the voice rising to make the point emphatically) or hear cute stories, and jokes, that are found in sermon resource materials. I want to hear about that person's experience of God in the past week."

This morning I want to share some stories from the past week about where I encountered the God of love – the God who wants us all to be a unified family of God's children. My stories may not be as dramatic as the God who was present for the Apostle Paul when Paul was released from prison but these are stories about a God who loves all of creation – including human beings.

Who was it that Jesus was praying for when he prayed that;
"they may be one, as we are one¹." ?

In that prayer Jesus also said,

"I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them²."

Who was Jesus praying for? Was it you and I? I believe that Jesus was praying that we might overcome our divisions and individualism. I believe that the love Jesus spoke about might bring us together as God's children in God's world – a people with a mission to demonstrate the power of love;

to this community;

to this neighbourhood;

to this city,

and even to this country?

In the passage from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, there is a story of Paul and Silas being released from prison. Their trip to prison had begun when the owners of a slave found that, because of Paul's freeing actions, they could no longer make money from this slave woman. Then they accused Paul and Silas of causing disruptions in the city and "**advocating customs that are not lawful for us Romans to adopt or observe.**³"

The slave woman had been set free from her demons by an act of love. Where love is present; God is present.

¹ John 17: 22

² John 17: 26

³ Acts 16:21

When we see love in God's world today, we know that God is present.

Paul and Silas were imprisoned for advocating actions that were contrary to the “customs” of the Roman Empire. The powers of Empire continue to exist and imprison those – who are like Paul and Silas - who have a different perspective.

As an example, we might consider the temporary detention centres that are being established to imprison those who question the policies of the G20 leaders who will be gathering here in Toronto in June. Protests will be allowed, after all Canada is a nation where we can all express our views – is it not? BUT, protests will be allowed in Queen's Park – a place that is out of sight of the “leadership”. Whatever happened to a free and civil discussion of the issues with democratically elected people? Where is the **oneness** that Jesus advocated? Are we not all in this together?

Of course, the powers of the status quo – the powers of Empire – would have us believe that respectable people do not engage in protest marches. I like what Rick Salutin wrote about respectability:

“But what's wrong with respectability? Well, it cozies you up to the wrong sets of people and values, if you're trying to pierce the sore spots and hidden essences of society. Respectability is inherently smug and complacent, which tends not to lead to insight. As an outsider, or feeling like one, you lack the vested interest in the status quo.”⁴

Paul and Silas, and many Christians over the centuries, have not been considered to be “respectable” because we worship the God of love, rather than the respectable, small “g” gods of this world. What does it mean to be “respectable” in the face of poverty, war and hunger? How many congregations want their clergy to be “respectable”?

This week I saw God present in an article that was written by Wilf Bean, a member of a Common Life Group at the United Church's Tatamagouche education centre⁵.

Wilf wrote about his memories of Ursula Franklin, the Quaker physicist and peacemaker. She wrote about her memories of living in an occupied country during WWII, but she reflected on how, for her, there were parallels within Canada today. Ursula Franklin wrote that Canada is now occupied by alien forces that put profit above all human or earth values.

I saw God involved in Wilf's advocacy that we Christians engage in opportunities to vision and support each other in living our faith as a Christian counter-culture.

⁴ Rick Salutin, The Globe & Mail, Sept. 16, 1999

⁵ Wilf Bean, Common Life Newsletter, April 2010

Although this Christian culture and Christian values are surrounded by a society dedicated to what Douglas Hall calls, "The Kingdom of Death" this Christian counter-culture is based on love, caring, sharing and an economy of abundance. We are known for our generosity – as an article in Maclean's magazine has confirmed. "*The average annual donation from a churchgoer is \$1,038. For the rest of the population, \$295.*"⁶

By reading these scriptures, I was once again reminded of God's continual presence, and that God's dream is that we may have peace with each other. Jesus prays that we might love one another as he loves us. What if we were to set aside our divisions in this world and concentrate on what we have in common – would that not be an act of love?

On Monday I was sitting in a circle of people at Five Oaks. Ched Myers, a biblical scholar, was presenting on how the God that Christians worship is different than the small "g" gods that North American society worships.

Ched walked over to one woman in the circle and asked her if she would be willing to share the chocolate bar that she had received from her children on Mother's Day – the day before. She agreed. The chocolate bar was passed around the group and anyone who wanted a piece broke it off. Of course, as Christians, you know that when it had gone full circle there was some left over.

Ched used that as an example of how an economy can function using Christian principles. God has already provided more than enough for all of us. Love calls us to share the wealth AS IF WE WERE ONE!

We see that virtually every time we have a pot luck dinner at church. Everyone makes a contribution, according to their gifts. Sharing produces an abundance of food, and there are leftovers. That's how love works; that's how God works.

I saw God this week – in the sharing that took place at Five Oaks, and here at Newtonbrook. Sharing is such a counter-cultural act. Sharing goes far beyond the "giving back" that is promoted in North American society – a phrase that implies that one has collected more than "enough", and can afford to give some back. Christian sharing recognizes that God has blessed the world with abundance, and we are called to share so that all may live an abundant life.

I saw God being present this week in a conversation.

One of the women involved in the conversation was suffering from anxiety. It was so severe that she had been to her Dr. for help. Her anxiety was a result of the fact that she feared that her career with her employer would be downsized out of existence. Others in the conversation were active listeners, fully engaged with

⁶ <http://www2.macleans.ca/2010/05/06/do-atheists-care-less/>

John 17: 20 – 26, Acts 16: 16 - 34 Set Free by LOVE
May 16, 2010, Newtonbrook United Church, Rev. Allan Baker

her feelings of apprehension. Everyone took the situation seriously. Everyone expressed support from their hearts. Her anxiousness dissipated. Love was present! God was present.

These are some of the places where I saw God being present in God's world as I travelled the journey of life this week. You may have seen God present in many different ways – and I invite you to share those stories when you are conversing with others during the coming week. After all, the world is waiting to hear the Good News of God's presence and we Christians are messengers. God's love is love that we share, just as Jesus shares love. As disciples of Jesus, we follow his example. All of us are we are set free by love! **Thank you God!**

HYMN # 169 – When Hands Reach out Beyond Divides

Questions for Reflection:

1. Who was Jesus praying for? Was it his disciples, or all “believers”?
2. Where have you encountered God's love this week?
3. How is the Christian faith, as practiced by our church, a threat to the “respectable gods” of the status quo?