

Shipwreck and Sustenance

Acts 27:13-44 by Patty Friesen (Sept 9/18)

Thirteen years ago, warm swirling winds in the Gulf of Mexico picked up speed and hit the Gulf Coast with unbelievable force. It pushed off-shore oil platforms onto land, broken the levees in New Orleans, flooding the city and leaving tens of thousands homeless. Hurricane Katrina had the power to topple not only buildings but social myths themselves; myths rooted deep in the North American landscape that North Americans were prosperous and self-sufficient. Katrina reminded us that we have neighbours, most often people of colour, living in poverty. This natural disaster peeled off the glossy veneer of the American Dream and caused a humble re-examination of social relationships.

Hurricane Katrina also brought out the best in people, starting with the response of people of faith. Mennonite Central Committee worker David Whettstone in Washington DC said, "Hurricane Katrina revitalized our opportunities for voluntary service. In this, the leadership of youth and under-represented communities is vital. Often those most affected by problems have the most helpful ideas." (MWR). I went with two other church women to work on a Honduran Mennonite Church in Meteora. On our last day, our not wealthy hosts took us out for a crab feed that brought tears to our eyes with their gift of food and love in the midst of a crisis.

In Acts 27, Paul is in his own hurricane. He is bound as a political prisoner on a ship headed for Rome, for his trial before Caesar. He is under the guard of a centurion named Julius. It is interesting that Acts names him. It is perhaps because of his kindness of Paul and perhaps he became a believer because of Paul's influence as

Paul's jailer in Philippi was converted. This prison ship ran aground in the hurricane and broke apart. Jews in particular were afraid of the sea. They were primarily people of the land and not sailors like their neighbours the Phoenicians. For them, the winds and waves held many terrors. They were buffeted by the storm for 14 days. Just before dawn, Paul urged them all to eat, took bread and gave thanks to God in front of them all. Then he broke the bread and began to eat. They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves. When they had eaten as much as they wanted, the lightened the ship by throwing the grain into the sea.

This is no ordinary meal. Paul blesses the bread, breaks it and shares it like Jesus feeding the 5000 or Jesus feeding the disciples at the Last Supper. Paul does not have the power to calm the storm like Jesus but he knows who does and he calls on Jesus to be present to them. This is an inclusive communion. Paul welcomes all to take and eat and be strengthened for their trials in the storm. This unconverted audience is promised salvation from the sea and God gracious grants it, not because of their faith but simply because God desires to save them. It fits God's divine purpose of who God is as a loving, saving God that not one hair on their heads should be lost.

After crossing through the sea of death, the prisoners and sailors land safely on the island of Malta where the islanders make a fire for them and feed them, paralleling Jesus' building a fire on shore and feeding the disciples after the resurrection. As Paul fed others, he is fed by others, reflecting a mutuality in giving and receiving from people who are different from us.

This shipwreck is such an important story that its details take up a whole chapter at the end of Acts. The early Christians believed that like Noah's ark and Jesus' fishing

boat, that the church was a safe ship on the chaotic sea of Roman pagan gods and beliefs. The church was the safe haven where all who believed were kept safe. On this ship of faith, the breaking of bread strengthened the community for their trials even as they fed others. The early church fed people during the plagues in Alexandria and started the first hospitals. The writer of Acts, Luke does not imagine a large Christian ship that dominates the pagan world but imagines a small Christian ship that feeds and eats with and works alongside pagans.

Luke could have never imagined the conversion of the Roman Emperor and the baptism of his armies. Luke could not have imagined huge cathedrals built with taxes. Luke could not have imagine Christianity becoming the dominant religion in the world and going to holy war against Jews and Muslims. Luke envisioned the church as a small ship floating on the stormy seas of the Roman Empire, not as the sea itself.

With the conversion of Roman Emperor Constantine, the church became the sea and Christianity has become the dominant religion of Europe and North and South America for millenium. But Christianity as the sea itself is in a storm these days. In Europe and North America, fewer people are affiliating with church. Our national church, our private camps and private schools are in down-sizing mode. Our ability to weather the storm depends on how we work collaboratively with people of other faiths, while calmly off-loading the extra weight in our institutions and focussing on Christ and feeding others.

The Book of Acts is relevant for us today as we rely on the Holy Spirit's guidance in building us up into a community that breaks down barriers as it is breaking bread. We know our purpose and calling in the Valley. We know it involves spiritual food in

worship and communion, and physical food in potlucks, and meals for those who are sick and bereaved, and in community gardens. Food reduces fear and hunger in the midst of a disaster and strengthens and sustains us in the midst of our personal and communal shipwrecks.

2018, our 90th year, has been an unforgettable year of shipwreck and sustenance in our community. In one year, we've suffered cancer, strokes, heart surgeries, drought, hailstorms, and the deaths of our loved ones. We have weathered these storms because we've been sustained by good people on the boat with us who have fed us physically with soup and spiritually with prayer and encouragement. We've also been sustained through the hope of new births in our families and church these next few months - hope for our future. We are also sustained by the beauty of creation - even as Prince Albert National Park also celebrates its' 90th anniversary this fall. We should have planned a joint celebration with them this fall but maybe we'll plan a joint 100th anniversary in 10 years! I encourage us to get to Wonderful Waskiesu this fall if we weren't there this summer.

This fall we will also go through our every third year congregational pastoral review. Where are we at in our 90th year and where do we hope to be at our 100th anniversary? Three years ago we envisioned three priorities: 1. focus on youth ministry which we have fulfilled through hiring Terri Lynn half-time. 2. We envisioned use of our building which continues to happen through concerts, weddings, funerals and as Osler Community Garden meeting space and improving sound and AV systems. 3. We envisioned streamlining our committees and guidelines which we're still working on. As we begin our fall schedule, Sunday School, congregational review and celebrating our

90th anniversary, we will begin with sustenance and eat together over potluck lunch today. All are welcome.

Let us pray: Thank you Gracious God for your calming presence with us in the midst of shipwreck and sustenance. Thank you for those in the boat who have fed us and cared for us. Thank you for the gifts of new babies that are coming and the gifts of your creation at Prince Albert National Park. Strengthen us as we sail forth into our work and school and the work of the church in our 90th year, that we may continue to be trusting and true to you and to our call to feed others. Amen.