

Easter 4A
Peace, Seattle
May 7, 2017
Acts 2:42-47, John 10:1-10

THE AROMA OF COMMUNITY

It's been fun digging through Peace archives recently in anticipation of the 75th anniversary of the congregation in 2019: old church directories, newspaper clippings, photos, and other memorabilia.

In my foray through things the last couple weeks I've found several little treasures.

- The first was a clipping from the July/August 1946 edition of Peace Notes announcing that, when Pastor Luther Anderson and his bride Lilian were on their honeymoon, one of the guest preachers would be Ruben Spannaus—a name many of us recognize as belonging to the father of Boots Spannaus Winterstein, who is now a member of Peace. I loved discovering that connection between our life as a congregation then and our life as a congregation now.
- Another delight was finding a sticky note from June Eaton on a presentation she'd put together on the history of the congregation.

Yesterday I was with June's family as we committed her ashes to rest between those of Tim and their son Jonathan at Forest Lawn. I told Sharon, Fred & Kris that I'd found June's name on dozens of letters written to former pastors and interns, in preparation for Peace's 50th anniversary celebration.

Seeing her writing and hearing her voice come through those pages, made her present to me in a delightful way. There is indeed something powerful and meaningful about being touched by someone or something in a way that brings past connections into the present.

I'm reading a book right now in which author Cynthia Barnett traces the natural and cultural history of RAIN.¹ In her chapter on the SCENT of rain, she tracks down the chemical origins of that unique aroma that fills the air when rain arrives—especially after a period of dryness.

Her zeal to understand his phenomenon took her half way around the world to a village in India named Kannauj, which for centuries has been about the business of producing fragrant oils and perfumes using only natural ingredients distilled from nature.

It turns out that, in this land where the annual monsoon rains come after months of dryness, the scent of fresh rain is composed of organic compounds that build up in the atmosphere and are absorbed in the very soil itself. By excavating the clay soil around Kannauj by hand, and then steaming the sun baked disks in a process honed over hundreds of years, the artisans of scent are able to release the aroma that's been trapped in the soil, distill it, and bottle it.

The final product is called the mitti atar: the scent of fresh rain.

In our first lesson this morning, we get a whiff of another sort: the aroma of the early community life of the first Christian disciples.

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day...they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

¹ Cynthia Barnett. *Rain—A Natural and Cultural History*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2015)

The picture Luke paints of our spiritual ancestors sounds pretty ideal, doesn't it?

Like the church really had its act together—and so soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus!

And if we didn't have any of St. Paul's correspondence we might get the impression that every fledgling Christian community operated on good behavior!

Thankfully, we DO have Paul's letters—at least some of them—and so we know that the situation on the ground in a number of places where he planted congregations was much more complicated and uneven and contested.

I say thankfully because I think it's helpful to know that those first people of faith on whose shoulders we stand were NOT perfect, and this relieves us of the burden of trying to be perfect ourselves.

Our experience is perhaps more likely to be aligned with that of a congregation whose pastor wrote to them the following:

We have made many strides during [the year past.] We've moved into our own house of worship...we've experienced increases in church and Sunday School membership. We've given greater attention to the "prime purpose of the Church."...For all of this we should be grateful.

But there is much yet to do. Though we have grown in numbers, our growth in godliness has not kept pace. Our worship of God at church and in our homes leaves much to be desired.

Empty chairs do not develop a sense of Christian fellowship and common interest in the progress of the church...This is a situation which should concern each of us.

We have most much of the "sense of friendliness" [we once had]...Our giving, while for the most part good, is not yet for all of our [people] a loving expression of their concern for the development of the Kingdom of God.²

That congregation's experience, it seems, was a far cry from:

Day by day...they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

By now you may have guessed the identity of the pastor who wrote that report: Luther Anderson, founding pastor of Peace, who wrote these words in the first two years of our congregation's existence.

As eras, events, and experiences recede into the rear view mirrors of our lives, it's easy to impart to them a quality of nostalgia; to remember them not as they were but as we wish they were.

We who live life in the turbulent present know that nostalgic feelings for a non-existent past ultimately won't serve us. If anything, they only make us feel more isolated in our own struggles and in our less than ideal present.

But even if Acts 2 represents more an ideal picture of the early church rather than the real church with all its messiness and complications, it still gives us a pattern that can sustain us, and a vision to aim for.

² The 1st, 2nd, and 4th paragraphs are excerpted from Pastor Luther Anderson's annual report of 1947. The 3rd paragraph is taken from his annual report of 1946.

Like Moses who could see the Promised Land from Mt. Nebo but never set foot there...

Like Martin Luther and his namesake, Martin Luther King Jr., who articulated dreams of grace and freedom, which we have yet as a church and as a nation to fully inhabit...

And like Luther Anderson, a rookie pastor who knew what we wanted this “wet behind the ears” congregation to strive for... we have received a legacy; a hard won wisdom.

That legacy, that wisdom, teaches us that even when the Holy Spirit is working overtime alongside us, community life is not a given; it is not automatic.

It takes dedication; it takes work; it takes investment. It takes gifted people who want to make a difference and who have been given the means to move toward that goal.

And underneath all that, it takes listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd, and trusting that he will keep accompanying us on all our journeys—in the dark valleys and in the joyful experiences of our life together; gathering us together and touching our lives in the Word and the Water and the Meal.

There are many voices that beckon us to follow. But we put our trust in the Voice of him who calls us to STEP RIGHT ON THROUGH THE GATE and to find ourselves living life abundant.

Amen.