

St. Bonnie Henry

If you live in British Columbia, and perhaps even if you don't, you will be familiar with Dr. Bonnie Henry, our Provincial Health Officer, appointed in 2018. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic she and Adrian Dix, B.C.'s Minister of Health, would give daily briefings.

Early on Dr. Henry would end her briefings with "be kind, be calm and be safe", a phrase which she said first on the 17th of March 2020. This phrase, "be kind, be calm and be safe" is emblazoned on t-shirts, postcards, wooden signs, and even on a special-edition pair of John Fluevog shoes. Fluevog designed these shoes with Dr. Henry in mind. The Fluevog website quotes John Fluevog,

"At times like these, we're so fortunate to have someone who is calm and comforting but direct, and positive but realistic, informing and educating us day to day. We always like to find ways to help, and to highlight those who are doing good in our world. To hear about and see that our admiration for Dr. Henry was mutual was just a beautiful cherry on top of an already great idea sundae," says John. (www.fluevog.com)

Dr. Henry has been nominated for both the Order of British Columbia and the Order of Canada, two of the highest civilian honours in our country. She has come to epitomise grace under pressure; a calming and reassuring presence. She conducts herself with a quiet dignity and also is known as speaking her mind during Zoom meetings with leaders when it comes to dispensing knowledge and holding firm to restrictions.

At one such Zoom meeting with various Religious Leaders, the conversation arose about Communion. Someone asked if we would be returning to the common cup and the look of abject terror on her face was very clear. There will be no more common cup. She is an infrequent Church-goer but her mother attends her local church frequently. Because she understands what a religious service looks like, her decisions regarding such things as congregational singing, mask wearing, and use of the common cup come from an informed place.

And so, you may be wondering what does any of this have to do with today's reading? I'm so glad you asked!

St. Paul is writing to the early church in Ephesus when he writes,

"Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

(Ephesians 4.31, NRSV)

Paul wrote to the Ephesians while he was in prison in Rome, approximately 62CE. The early church was in danger of fracture and he wrote them to implore unity and cooperation between the Jews and Gentiles. He wanted them to resist evil, to work together and to further the kingdom of God. It could be said he wanted them to "be kind, be calm and be safe".

Today's epistle begins, "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another." (*Ephesians 4.25, NRSV*) In other words, speak truthfully. Realise that we are more alike than we are different. Understand that when we put ourselves in another person's sandals, we are more likely to pay attention to what is important to them, and perhaps even, realise that is important to us as well. That, friends, is called "being in relationship".

Kindness is defined as "a type of behavior marked by acts of generosity, consideration, or concern for others, without expecting praise or reward. Kindness was one of the main topics in the Bible." (*www.wikipedia.com*) Kindness is something that epitomises how Jesus lived his life...always thinking of others, always challenging the status quo to care for the "disposable" parts of society...the poor, the sick, the widowed, the aged.

It is quite simple to be kind...it's a matter of putting someone else's needs before your own. Washing your hands, wearing a mask, getting vaccinated, maintaining physical distance. Yes, I know we're tired of all the rules and regulations and we desperately want things to get back to normal.

I'm going to let you in on a secret...WE ARE NEVER GOING BACK to how things were. We can't go back to how things were before. We have learned a new way of being Church, of being family together.

There are some folks at this service today that we may never see in person, in the flesh, as it were, and yet they are part of our beloved Worshipping family. It doesn't mean we throw away how things were done before COVID, it means we take the best of who we were and combine it with the best parts of who we are, right now, together in Christ.

"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear."

(Ephesians 4.26, NRSV)

When we return to our Church buildings things will look different than they did before COVID. There will be hand-sanitising stations. We will need to sign in. We will not pass the collection plate. There will not be a common cup. We will use a large screen and projector, so people in Worship can see what the folks see on their screens see at home.

"Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

(Ephesians 4.31, NRSV)

For some, these changes may be difficult to accept. But they won't be forever. As we live into the reality of post-COVID life, or, as it's seeming more and more, "life WITH COVID", we will need to be flexible in how we Worship together. We will continue to use our beloved hymn books. We will use our beloved worship books. It won't be as it was pre-COVID. With God's grace, it will be better.

We have been worshipping for the past 17 months, primarily online. There have been a few Outdoor services and we are learning how to bring a "live service" to a "small screen". For 17 months we have worshipped in the United Church tradition on the first and third Sunday's and in the Anglican tradition on the second and fourth Sunday's.

This will continue when we move back into our buildings. The congregation will gather at Knox United on the first and third Sunday's. And the congregation will gather at Christ Church on the second and fourth. Each Wednesday there will be Worship at Christ Church, as there has been almost as long as there has been Christ Church.

I want you to think back to how Church was when you were a child. Was it the same service you attend now? Likely not. I remember, as a child, attending ante-communion with a Deacon coming into the Worship space chanting "Oh Lord, open thou our lips" and the response was "And thy mouth shall show forth by praise". If I wasn't turned around, facing the front by the time the first sentence was intoned on my own, my mother, or someone else's mother, would turn me around. It takes a village, right?

The first time I heard those phrases intoned at Seminary I involuntarily flinched and the Chaplain started laughing so hard, he had to re-start the Worship service. He remembered, himself, flinching as a child in hearing those opening sentences chanted.

Through our lifetimes we have seen the introduction of newer forms of Worship, newer hymns, different prayers, different languages. Through our lifetimes we have seen priests, ministers, students and deacons come and go. We have seen the music ministry change. We have used different translations of the bible.

And while change may be difficult, in the end we are left with a rich tapestry of the past and the present, while looking to the future. I never would have imagined two years ago that our first year of ministry would be primarily online. I would never have imagined that we would celebrate our first anniversary online. And yet, here we are.

I would never have imagined that our Holy Week Worship services would translate to virtual services. Some of them did not, so we adapted. And that, right there, my friends, is the key. Flexibility and adaptation.

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”
(Ephesians 5.1, NRSV)

We owe it to ourselves, to each other, to God and to Dr. Henry to continually be kind, be calm and be safe. If we run around frantically declaring that the world is on fire and we're all going to perish, it will not accomplish anything other than adding more anxiety to already anxious people.

If we decide that we need to put ourselves first, "sod anybody else", we will show the worst of who we are. We will be going against the life and work of God.

If we listen to disreputable news sources and buy into the conspiracy theories, instead of doing our research with reputable news sources, speaking to experts in epidemiology and virology, we serve to put ourselves and those around us at risk.

In the words of St. Paul, "be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another", (Ephesians 4.32, NSRV).

In the words of St. Bonnie Henry, "Be kind, be calm, stay safe".

Let the Church say AMEN!

8 August 2021

Pentecost 11

Ephesians 4.25-5.2

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