"Looking Beyond Ourselves"

Exodus 17:1–7 & Philippians 2:1–13 ~ *September 27, 2026 ~ Trinity United ~ Rev. G. Scott Turnbrook.*

A question to begin our conversation: Have you ever noticed that churches are very good at knowing what they need? We need more volunteers, more money, more people, more children, more young people, more organizers, a better sound system. Churches have a remarkable ability to make a list of their needs. And there is nothing inherently wrong with that. In fact, it is important to ask what we need. That is part of responsible stewardship and part of the visioning work we are beginning together here at Trinity. But this morning, I want us to take our questioning one step further. Instead of beginning with: "What do I want from Trinity?" or even, "What does Trinity need?" perhaps we begin with a different question: "What is Trinity here for?" And perhaps even more importantly: "Who is Trinity here for?" Because one of the most beautiful and distinctive things about Christian community is that we do not exist for ourselves. We are here for something beyond ourselves.

That is where our two Scripture readings meet us this morning. In Exodus, the Israelites are in the wilderness. They are thirsty, uncomfortable. And when people are uncomfortable, we begin to complain. They ask Moses, "Why did you bring us out here? Why did you lead us into this wilderness? Are you trying to kill us?" Poor Moses. He has been called by God to lead these people out of slavery. He has confronted Pharaoh. He has led them through the Red Sea. He has tried to figure out how to feed them in the wilderness. And now they are thirsty and angry. Moses cries out to God, essentially saying, "What am I supposed to do with these people?" And God provides…water comes from a rock. It is a remarkable story because it reminds us that God sees the needs of the community and provides nourishment, even in the wilderness. And then we turn to Paul's letter to the community of Phillipi. Paul takes this same idea of community and moves it in another direction. He says: "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others*." It is almost as though Paul is saying: God provides for you. Now learn to provide for one another.

That is the movement I want us to consider today. From being nourished to becoming nourishing. From receiving to giving. From asking, "What do I get from this community?" to asking, "What might I contribute to the life of this community, and to the wider world?" Because when you distill it all down, that is what Christian community is meant to be: a community that cares for others beyond itself.

Now, please understand what I am saying: this does not mean that our own needs don't matter. They absolutely do. The Israelites were thirsty. Their thirst mattered. And there are times when we come through these doors thirsty ourselves. Thirsty for friendship, for meaning, for hope, for forgiveness, for a place where we can simply be ourselves. Sometimes we come to church carrying grief, loneliness, uncertainty. Sometimes we are tired. And the church absolutely should be a place where people are nourished. That is not selfish. But Scripture reminds us that nourishment is never meant to end with us. God gives water to the thirsty Israelites so that they can continue the journey. God gives us community so that we can continue the journey, and help others along theirs. Paul writes: "*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others*."

And so, as we continue this visioning work at Trinity, I think there is a very important distinction for us to make. We need to talk about community before we can begin talking about programs. Programs matter. Ministries matter. Committees matter. Budgets matter. Buildings matter. But the foundation underneath all of those things is the seminal question: "What kind of community are we becoming?" Because we could have the most impressive collection of programs in the Okanagan and still miss the heart of the gospel. We could fill every calendar square, book every space in this church, and still fail to be a community of Christ. What matters first is the kind of people we are becoming together.

So I want for us to consider four kinds of nourishment for Trinity as we look toward the chapters ahead. First, there is spiritual nourishment. The wonderful Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen spoke about spiritual nourishment in his book "Reaching Out". We need places where we can encounter God. That happens here on Sunday morning. It happens through prayer. Through music. Through Scripture. Through silence. Through learning. Through conversation. Through the moments when something unexpectedly opens our hearts. Faith needs nourishment.

None of us can live indefinitely on spiritual leftovers from twenty years ago! Our faith, like our bodies, needs to be fed. We need opportunities to ask questions. To wonder. To doubt. To learn. To pray. To discover what God might be saying in this particular season of our lives. And that nourishment is not only for ourselves. A spiritually nourished community has something to offer the world. When we have experienced grace, we become more capable of extending grace. When we have experienced forgiveness, we become more capable of forgiving. When we have experienced welcome, we become more capable of welcoming others. When we have experienced God's love, we become more capable of embodying that love. So spiritual nourishment is not the end of the journey. It prepares us for the journey. Spiritual nourishment is critical.

Second, there is relational nourishment. One of the greatest gifts of church is that we don't have to do life alone. The wonderful German theologian Dietrich Bonhoffer, who prophetically wrote through the Nazi war time, taught about relational nourishment in his book “Life Together” taught about relational nourishment. We need people. We need people who know our names. People who notice when we aren't here. People who celebrate with us. People who sit beside us when life falls apart. People who will call us and offer to bring soup and casseroles when we are sick. That is part of the beauty of church. Care for one another. And yet even relational nourishment is larger than ourselves. The friendships we form here teach us how to be a community that welcomes, not just our friends, but also the stranger. The pastoral care we experience here teaches us how to care for people beyond these walls. Relational nourishment teaches us to live the Way of Christ through the week ahead as we care for others who have not yet found a place of belonging.

And that leads us to a third kind of nourishment: generational nourishment. A healthy church is not simply a gathering of people who happen to be the same age. It is a place that celebrates where generations can encounter another. James Fowler taught about this in his insightful “Stages of Faith” development. Children need the wisdom of elders. Elders need the energy and imagination of children and young adults. Those of us in the middle need both! There is something deeply Christian about generations sharing life together. The church becomes a place where wisdom is passed along, but where wisdom is also challenged and renewed. Where stories are remembered and new stories are welcomed. Generational nourishment does not simply ask, “How do we preserve what we have?” It also asks: “What kind of community are we creating for people not yet here?” How do we reflect the demographics of our community in an authentic way. This is an important question for Trinity. Because looking beyond ourselves means thinking about people we may never meet. It means asking what kind of church a child walking through these doors twenty years from now might discover. It means: asking whether someone who has never felt comfortable in a church might find belonging; asking whether someone who is lonely, grieving, questioning, or searching might discover a community where they can take a first step toward God.

And that brings us to the fourth kind of nourishment: missional nourishment. This may be the most challenging…and I suspect the most beautiful. The church does not exist simply for the church. The church exists for the world God loves. Lesslie Newbiggin author of “Open Secret: A Theology of Mission” teaches how the church is a sign, instrument and foretaste of God's reign. The church is not a private club for people who already belong, to keep Trinity running. We are here to participate in God's healing work in the world. That means asking: Who is thirsty around us? Where is there hunger? Where is there loneliness? Where is there injustice? Where are people searching for meaning? Where does creation need care? Where are our neighbours longing for community? Where does reconciliation need to happen?

Spiritual, relational, generational, and missional nourishment…this is where Paul's words from Philippians become particularly challenging. “*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others*.” Visioning into the future requires this kind of looking beyond ourselves: recognizing that we are not the centre of the story, making room for voices and experiences that challenge our assumptions, allowing our understanding of community to draw the circle wider. Next week, on World Communion Sunday we will begin distributing feedback forms. But, I want us to resist the temptation to answer that question too quickly. Just like a fine wine…to take time savour and pondering what is before us. So, into this week I invite us to further listen, pray, talk, notice, wonder, and discover what God is doing among us. And so, during the ‘Music for Reflection’ that Diana leads us in, I invite you to ponder the question: “Trinity is at its best when_____. Amen.