

Over 19 years of ministry with you at McClure United Church, I've been enjoyed three sabbatical leaves – the first in 2004, the next in 2009, and the last in 2014. Each sabbatical provided its own opportunities, challenges, learning and rejuvenation. For me, each fostered renewal of mind, body and spirit; renewal of relationships with family and friends, and with you as a congregation. From each I brought back a few new ideas that led to new initiatives; a little more energy for study groups, worship and preaching; and some different approaches to ministry.

I hope these sabbaticals bore fruit that was good for you as a church. I believe each five-month sabbatical every five years equipped me to be a better minister for you. Each supported and sustained my own health and well-being, and that of my family. Those sabbaticals were also a significant factor in extending the number of years we've shared in ministry. Sabbaticals can lead to healthier and more long-term ministries. That's one value of them for which I'm truly grateful.

On my sabbatical leave in 2004, Michele and I spent time on Vancouver Island. In February, we spent some time in Tofino, on the island's wind-whipped, "wet" coast. While there we visited the Eagle Aerie Art Gallery. There, several works by Canadian artist Roy Henry Vickers are on display. Roy Vickers' father was a fisherman with family roots in three northwest coast First Nations – Tsimshian, Haida, and Heiltsuk. Roy's mother was a school teacher whose parents had immigrated to Canada from England. This combined heritage would seem to have had a strong influence on Roy's art. One of his pieces that I was particularly taken with is called Easter 1985. I purchased a print of that work. It has hung in my office at McClure since I brought it home with me from that sabbatical leave.

Today, I'd like to share with you this image of artist Roy Henry Vickers' creation, Easter 1985.

**** (click to picture – pause in silence as congregation takes it in) ****

Listen to what the artist himself has written about this work:

“During the 1970’s, I was struck by the message of Christianity and the culmination of religious celebrations that happen each Easter. I wanted to remind people that Easter was more than bunny rabbits and Easter egg hunts, and so I painted a number of renditions of the face of Christ.

“The Easter of 1985 found me again wanting to create a work that would leave a lasting impression and provide the viewer with a cause for meditation. I reworked an older painting, showing the face of Christ in red with a crown of thorns and the face of man in black. The basic thought behind this creation was that if we identify with Christ in his crucifixion and death, we also acknowledge his resurrection and everlasting life.”

**** (pause again in silence, and take in the image) ****

It’s that last, powerful sentence by Roy Vickers’ that strikes home deeply for me:

“...If we identify with Christ in his crucifixion and death,
we also acknowledge his resurrection and everlasting life.”

I’ve reflected on these words often since discovering this work on my sabbatical in 2004. And here is the emphasis that I have found – that has been revealed to me – in those words:

“...**If** we identify **with** Christ **in** his crucifixion and death, //
we also **acknowledge** his resurrection and everlasting life.”

In other words, it is **in** identifying with Christ in his crucifixion and death, that we **are** acknowledging his resurrection and everlasting life. / Ponder that for a moment, why don’t you. / The one goes hand in hand with the other; like two-sides of the one face of our Lord, and, of our Christian faith. //

Each of us, to a lesser or greater degree, has known and will know suffering and death. This, truthfully, is a part of life. // To live is to know that one day we

will die. To love and be loved is open ourselves to being hurt and hurting others. To have and to hold is to accept that there will come a time of not having and of letting go. To give birth, to guide and nourish children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews, is to suffer with and for them when the worst in this world hurts them or, by their own choices, when they harm themselves. //

Beyond such personal sorrow is the suffering we also know because we are part of the larger human family. We may not be the ones who breathe in the gases of chemical warfare, or those upon whom bombs fall, or those whom terrorists have attacked; but, still, our hearts do break for the women, men and children who have died and have suffered so. / Likewise, we are not murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, and none of us may know personally their families and friends; but we do empathize with them, we can work alongside them, we can make efforts to know and support them in their search for truth, justice and healing.

What's more, beyond the countless ways human beings have found to crucify themselves and one another, there is as well the suffering of Creation itself. Much of this has been brought on by human apathy, arrogance, avarice and greed. So that when the whole Creation is groaning, the climate is changing, oceans are rising as glaciers and ice caps are melting, floods and droughts abound and species are dying and becoming extinct, we – each of us – all of us – can identify with our having become both the architects and the bearers of Creation's cross.

Now remember this: If we identify **with** Christ **in** his crucifixion and death; if we identify **with** the suffering and death of **all** God's children – personally, socially, universally – then, already, in our identifying of ourselves with such as these we **are** acknowledging as well Christ's resurrection and everlasting life. Our

very identification with the “crucified” is a sign and a witness to the life and hope of the Risen One living in us even now.

That is what this image, and those words of Roy Henry Vickers’ say to me. That’s what Easter means to me. In a world filled with so much bad news, it is this gospel’s Good News that is very much needed indeed. And here, I believe, is part of what this Good News means:

When other voices ridicule us and put us down – as happened to Jesus with whom, in this, we can identify – then we also acknowledge Christ’s resurrection and everlasting life in us and we will refuse to stay put on whatever cross or in whatever tomb these voices would nail us or seek to put us in.

When we identify with Jesus with his arms outstretched in love for all, then, we also acknowledge that the Living Hope that was and is in Christ Jesus – battered and bruised in us though this hope be – does, still, live in us today. It is in knowing and believing this that, like Christ, our hearts do remain open and our arms remain outstretched in an undying Hope that the Prodigal will return one day.

If we identify with Christ in his suffering and death – in the suffering and death of ourselves, of others, and of Creation itself – then we do have Christ with us and within us also in the triumph of his resurrection. God’s victory over sin and death, in Christ, is ours as well. And we are like those women who went to the cemetery that first Easter morning thinking they’d find a dead Jesus, but instead found the tomb empty and their lives changed forever. We have come here this morning, to church, not expecting much perhaps. But we leave this place now, God willing, with the gift of Easter faith alive in us; this faith that is ready to be embodied in the life that we choose to live. God in Christ calls us to go forth now, to be the hands and feet, the voice and beating heart of the Risen One; and to do so in and for this world that God loves. The gifts of Christ’s “resurrection and

everlasting life” are **not** relicts of an ancient past, **nor** promises of some distant future; but they **are**, now, the driving-force and life’s-blood of all who are Christ’s followers today, including you and me.

If we identify **with** Christ in his crucifixion and death – if we identify with the suffering of all God’s children and God’s Creation – then, already, we **are** acknowledging that Christ in his compassion and steadfast love **lives** – that Christ is **Risen** – in you, in me, and in all who will to live and to love as Jesus does, still.

This is Easter’s amazing, wonderful, humbling, empowering Good News!

Do you remember those first words that the angel spoke to the woman at the empty tomb that first Easter morning? “Don’t be afraid,” the angel said. Then, when the Risen Christ met them, he also said to them: “Do not be afraid.” Then he said: “Go, and tell the others that they also will see me in this world.”

In Jesus Christ we have Life. We have it now, and have it more abundantly. Life begins, I believe, when you discover this truth for yourself and you act upon it. So, friends, don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid to live and laugh and love. Don’t be afraid to give and serve and care. Don’t be afraid to speak and to do. For the message of Easter is: “Don’t be afraid.” Christ is with you, within you, always.

So it is that, in these words of Ephesians, chapter 3, verse 20, we are bold to say: “Now to (God) who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly more than all we can ask or imagine, to (God) be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

**** (click to a blank screen) ****