

The Love We Leave Behind

Rev. Shawn Newton and Lay Chaplains
Volunteer Appreciation Sunday
19 June 2011

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation Words

“In the Beginning”

by David Whyte from *Fire in the Earth*

Sometimes simplicity rises
like a blossom of fire
from the white silk of your own skin.
You were there in the beginning
you heard the story, you heard the merciless
and tender words telling you where you had to go.
Exile is never easy and the journey
itself leaves a bitter taste. But then,
when you heard that voice, you had to go.
You couldn't sit by the fire, you couldn't live
so close to the live flame of that compassion
you had to go out in the world and make it your own
so you could come back with
that flame in your voice, saying listen...
this warmth, this unbearable light, this fearful love...
It is all here, it is all here.

Reading

“Set in Stone,” *Walking Toward Morning*, Victoria Safford

In [an old] cemetery once, I found a strangely soothing epitaph. The name of the deceased and her dates had been scoured away by wind and rain, but there was a carving of a tree with roots and branches (a classic nineteenth-century motif) and among them the words, ‘She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.’

At first this seemed to me a little meager, a little stingy on the part of her survivors, but I wrote it down and have thought about it since, and now I can't imagine a more proud or satisfying legacy. 'She attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things.'

Every day I stand in danger of being struck by lightning and having the obituary in the local paper say, for all the world to see, 'she attended frantically and ineffectually to a great many unimportant, meaningless details.'

How do you want your obituary to read?

'He got all the dishes washed and dried before playing with his children in the evening.'

'She balanced her checkbook with meticulous precision and never missed a day of work—missed a lot of sunsets, missed a lot of love, missed a lot of risk, missed a lot—but her [finances were] in order.'

'She answered all her calls, all her e-mail, all her voice-mail, but along the way she forgot to answer the call to service and compassion, and forgiveness, first and foremost of herself.'

'He gave and forgave sparingly, without radical intention, without passion or conviction.'

'She could not, or would not, hear the calling of her heart.'

How will it read, how does it read, and if you had to name a few worthy things to which you attend well and faithfully, what, I wonder, would they be?"

Homily: “Legacy”

It was a Friday night in the small town of Binscarth, Manitoba, when vandals broke into the Knox United Church twenty-two years ago.

“They dripped candle wax onto the sanctuary carpet, scorched the choir gowns, signed “666” in the guest book and emptied yellow powder from the fire extinguishers all over the hardwood pews.”¹

In February of this year, Mona Paradine, the nursery school teacher, found an envelope resting on the stairs leading into the building.

Inside were tucked four \$100 bills and an unsigned letter that read:

To the United Church:

Me and my brother did some damage at your church a long time ago. I was the one who wrecked a door and stole a knife and 50 cents from the collection tray.

My brother was the one who sprayed the fire extinguisher upstairs and caused the majority of the damage.

An angel or [a] ghost or something came to me and said that if I didn't pay you back for my share of the damage there would be a curse on me and my brother and that I could not go to heaven. . . .

I sincerely apologise to everyone at your church and I apologise to God for what I have done.

What me and my brother did at your church is something that I have deeply regretted my whole life.

I sincerely apologise again and I am ashamed of what I did.

Regret can cut an indelibly deep chasm in our lives.

It's easy enough to think one's self cursed sometimes,

¹ Samantha Rideout, “Apology accepted,” *The United Church Observer*, June 2011, p. 10-11.

when our mistakes haunt our days and our nights,
and make it hard even to find the way forward.

But, when we take it seriously—when regret gives way to remorse—
it has the potential to entirely change the plot,
to turn the direction of our story around.

It has the power to redeem and transform,
and open a new and different chapter in our lives.

That doesn't mean everything can always be put back right again,
but there is the promise, at least, of tending wounds and healing hurts—
and regret can be an irresistible catalyst to our taking those steps.

I'd love to know how the author of that letter feels today.
My hope is that by acknowledging his part in the vandalism
and by making amends, he's finally freed himself
from the fear and anguish that have kept him from being his best self.

I decided to use this story about Knox United a couple of weeks ago,
long before I watched the chaos and crime unfolding in the streets of
Vancouver Wednesday night, and long before the faces of the people
who carried out the destruction were posted all over the web.

I'm imagining there's quite a bit of regret out west this week,
and I hope some real remorse, too.

I say I hope because I find it hard to believe anyone would wish
such pointless destruction to be their legacy on this earth.

Did you catch that line from the choir's Introit?
"The only measure of our words and our deeds
will be the love we leave behind when we're gone."²

It's so profoundly true.

Every time I sit down with the family and friends
of someone who has recently died to prepare the memorial service,
I'm struck by the nature of the memories that are shared.

² Fred Small, "Everything Possible."

The key elements of someone's resume are always mentioned, but more often than not, the things that stand out were the person's greatest accomplishments—hardships overcome, bitterness defused, regret transformed.

Kindness when it was unexpected.
Generosity when there was little to share.
Compassion when anger could have carried the day.

The truth is that what most of us will be remembered for has far more to do with the condition of our heart than it does with the balance of our bank account, or the accomplishments on our resume.

The measure of whatever talents and privileges we might have been blessed with in this life will be how we used them in service to the greater good.

While what we do in this life is important and makes a difference, I'm coming more and more to understand the mantra that "*how* is more important than *what*."

How we undertake our life's work and our relationships, how we relate to bus drivers and police officers, how we treat ourselves and how we treat each other—all of it matters to the legacy we will leave behind when we're gone.

How is much more important than what.

That may seem a reckless thing to say on the day when we celebrate the volunteers of this congregation—the people who through the dedicated labour of their hands and hearts have made and continue to make this place all that it is.

There have been years here when we've honoured the tasks—the "what" of it all—thanking those of you who've brewed coffee and taught religious education, served on committees, ushered, and tidied up the building.

Indeed, there is great reason for us to express our deepest gratitude. From the bottom on my heart, and on the congregation's behalf,

I say thank you for your gifts of time and energy
to the well-being of this congregation and the welfare of each other.

But, this morning I want to honour, even more, our adverbs—
I want to honour the spirit of these gifts that have been given!

So, if you've undertaken your work this year
graciously, generously, and gleefully;
if you've treated others compassionately, lovingly, and justly;
if you've laboured purposefully and playfully,
and practised your faith faithfully,
please accept the deep gratitude of this congregation.

Turn and take a look around this room—
and bask in the thanks that we both give and receive.

And, if you're sitting thinking, "well, Shawn, I'm not quite there"
—if you realise you've missed the mark on occasion,
I hope you will welcome the invitation this new day holds out to you—
the sacred opportunity offered to each us each morning
to approach the "what" of our lives with our best and highest selves.

This isn't a call for perfection, but a call to passion and compassion.
For in the end, that will be what we have to show for our lives.

As Emerson wrote:

To go down to dust and dreams,
knowing that the world is a wee bit better,
and that even a single life breathes easier
because we have lived well, this is to have succeeded.

Friends, let us devote the days of our lives to that measure of success,
that the words of our epitaphs might read that:
"We attended well and faithfully to a few worthy things."

So be it.

Amen.

Closing Words

By Rev. Rudolph Nemser

We would give our children
The shiny stream
With hidden minnows
And racks of leaf-shadowed roundness
And the laughter of waterfalls.

We would give our children
A book whose pages are bent with reading,
Whose cover is smooth
With living,
Whose words are bold
With the unknown.

We would give our children
Kisses of strength
To be shared
And eager to love
And the knowledge
They are good
And this is joy.

So may it be for us all.