

St. David's Presbyterian Church

June 15, 2008

St. John's, NL

"Grace, Gains Through Loss, Generosity"

(Proper 6)

Dr. J. Dent

Today's service is like a tapestry interwoven with many coloured fibres. More and more it seems that any given Sunday has several themes and contexts. Today has the federal government's and national church's emphasis on National Aboriginal Day. The provincial government has reminded us that it is World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. Locally, we are celebrating the Lord's Supper as is our tradition at this time in June. Oh yes, and culturally it is Father's Day. These themes then are to be combined with the messages of the four Scripture passages, thus giving a rich fabric of colour to today's message, all in a brief period of time.

It's no wonder sometimes I underplay or miss important Sunday themes, such as last week's General Assembly, which sets the doctrine and priorities of the Presbyterian Church in Canada. We do have a national web cite, which is located at [www.presbyterian.ca](http://www.presbyterian.ca) There you can find daily summaries and minutes from that important national meeting.

And I could tell you about what's happening in my garden, but we'll save that as I am quickly running out of time. Life is like that. We think we have all the time in the world, until someone tells us the truth that this life has an end. And so we are reminded that our life comes to us by grace, not by our choice, nor by our planning, but by the grace of God and the choices of our parents.

Abraham's encounter with the three strangers reminds us of the centrality of grace not only in living itself, but also in giving life and receiving it. Abraham had the spiritual sensitivity to know that these three strangers were not just ordinary Bedouin but God's messengers, if not God Himself in three persons, or perhaps God and two angels as some commentators suggest. So he did his best to offer them the richest forms of hospitality available to him at the time. Once offered, the three get down to business. They wanted to talk to her and him about the fact that God would indeed honour His promise to make sure they had a son.

You have to realize that Abraham and Sarah had been waiting a long time, exactly twenty four years since chapter 12, for God to give them the grace to conceive. In fact, Sarah had given up on the promise and had given her servant girl to Abraham to have a child for them in an ancient surrogate way. This was Ishmael who now an older child, even a young man. In chapter 21

we learn Hagar the servant and her son Ishmael were put out of Abraham's home. Some say that was the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

But again the main point of this story is that Abraham is 99 and Sarah is 90. And yes, I believe they were indeed very elderly, as the Scripture indicates they were. And here is the point: never ever discount your life before God, or someone else's just because they are elderly. God may have some extraordinary thing for you to do or simply to be for someone else. Dare to dream again, in your senior years. Don't say "I can't do it." Trust the Lord to do what He is calling you to do. Ask what these last years are for, and open yourself up anew to the possibilities He might bring to your mind and your heart. Maybe it is ministry? Ask the Lord.

Respecting our elders is something Scriptures teaches, and something we as a culture need to learn anew. It is a sad fact that many seniors are abused, and treated with great disrespect. Old and young, rich and poor, across every ethnic boundary, we need to care for one another. It is a part of the grace of life given to us.

The second Scripture from Romans gives us another view of life. Simply put, Paul tells us that we should expect to suffer. He is addressing Christians who know God, and may have thought that the new life in Christ would be a yellow-brick road, tidy, straight forward. But indeed many Christians in Rome had to choose to honour Christ at the peril of their freedom, and even their lives. So Paul was teaching them to not be surprised when suffering comes. Even we today have to suffer, perhaps not so much for our faith, although the culture does jeer a great deal at Christianity and the Church. The question is: What do we do with our suffering?

If we have to endure suffering for our faith, will we continue in our trusting God, or give it up? Have I told you the story of the underground Russian church during the Soviet Union years? It was an illegal service in a house with a few dozen believers. They had stayed quiet so that the authorities would not know they were indeed holding a worship service. But sure enough one evening during worship, the door was kicked in, and a KGB agent held a machine gun at the worshippers. He said to them, "I will give you one chance to give up on your faith and leave. Everyone else who believes, move up against that wall, over there. Do it now." And many left the room, glad to escape with their lives. But several stayed, and moved slowly over to the brick wall. The KGB agent closed the door, aimed his weapon, and then strangely took off his cap and put his weapon down. He said to those remaining, that he wanted to be sure he would be worshipping

with true believers, so he did what he did. What would you have done if you were there? What would I have done?

Suffering produces endurance. That word for endurance in Greek is *hypmone* which means patience, fortitude, steadfastness, perseverance. As we choose to continue in our faith, our faith is strengthened through very difficult circumstances, things that you and I could never have imagined. This in turn produces character, an inner strength that God gives. Finally, as we persevere in our trusting God, we experience hope, believing in what we can't see. This word *elpis* is connected to faith, in that they both look for something that can't be immediately seen. It is confidence in the One who can't be seen. And so Paul later puts faith and hope (and love) together as the greatest of human attributes, and yet some might say that it is crazy to believe in what you can't see. Is it?

The Aboriginal peoples of Canada have gone through a lot. Their lands were taken and their cultures were decimated. The government thought they were doing first nations a favour by educating them in church schools. I don't believe the planned genocide theories, I believe they were trying to help them by re-educating and acculturating them into the main culture of Canada. This was a grave error. But the addictions and difficulties that plague many reserves and native communities didn't begin with the residential schools, but much earlier. I don't believe it was wrong to offer aboriginals Christian teaching and education. The Gospel is for everyone. But the institutionalization and forced way in which it was done was wrong. How it was done was wrong. And abuse is always wrong, whether it be sexual, physical, or emotional.

So I am pleased the Prime Minister had the courage to apologize and ask forgiveness for what the government has done. And there is a financial package in place to back up the words with some compensation. Of course, nothing will ever adequately compensate for what was done. Some will choose to not take advantage of the alternate dispute settlement process, and will sue until the end. But I hope that this season of healing and reconciliation will indeed be that. The Presbyterian Church in Canada has been involved at the earliest stages of this whole process, even though we are the smallest church partner with only a very few schools and a couple of dozen survivors at this point. All of us, through the suffering which we have received, mostly not of our own making, can be strengthened in who we are by trusting the Creator, the God who helps us through all our losses.

And so we can hope for better inter-racial relations, for better appreciation of what many have gone through. And for all of us who choose to trust Christ

with our lives, we can look to how He lived his life for clues as to how we might live our own. When he sent out the disciples, he sent them to do things so that people knew it was God working through them. The things he directly gave them power to do were: healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers and casting out demons. These were activities that God alone had power to do through the disciples. It was to say anew that God has power over sickness, God has power over life itself, God has power over the worst of current illnesses and God has power over malevolent spiritual forces of all kinds. And He chose and chooses to allow His church to exercise these ministries, rather than simply doing it Himself immediately. The question for us today is: Do we believe any longer that God has this kind of power? We could debate what these ministries are, but how much power does God have and how much does He give to His church today?

The church is often maligned in the media, and has sinned in many ways across history. However, the Church has also planted hospitals and schools, ministered to the poor and the prisoner, brought forth hope and help in a way that no other religion has. Let us not forget what positive things have been done in Jesus' name.

And to the fathers out there today, I note that we live in a confused and fatherless age. Fathers appear to be rarely noted or appreciated. On top of that, it is hard to know what to be like and how to appropriately father. I can only point you and myself in the direction of the Father, and the Son who followed his fathering. We all are learning anew how to love, how to care, how to give time and presence. This day is to simply say that you are needed, and desperately required for many have had so little positive experience of their dads. Carry on through suffering, through perseverance, through character building to hope. Perhaps you can show your strength in asking forgiveness where you have wronged others, showing your strength and God's grace to swallow pride, and confess where you've been wrong. This would be another healing moment, and launching point for reconciliation.

Jesus calls his disciples, calls fathers and calls us all to be generous, to give away that which we have received freely. This includes time, money, love, and caring. Give clear invitations to relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In such generosity, God is known and our lives are fulfilled. As we come to the Table today, let us prepare ourselves to be more committed to being generous as individuals and as the Church.

Let us pray.