

Sermon: "You are being rooted and grounded in love"

(Ephesians 3:17)

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During the last two weeks I walked down "memory lane". It is 40 years ago this month that I graduated from Knox College, and the College got in touch with me and my classmates of '66 to invite us back for a banquet and reception at the College, a workshop on theological education and this year's Convocation last Wednesday evening. Some of my classmates were present, a few with their spouses. It is also 40 years ago this month that I was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in Knox Church, Dundas, Ontario, by the Presbytery of Hamilton; last Sunday that congregation, which is this year celebrating its 175th year of life and witness, invited me as part of that celebration to return to the site of that deeply significant event in my life, and to preach at their morning service. I met some people who remembered what I had done with their sons and daughters in that young people's group, and some who remembered my own parents, who were members of that church in their latter years. Of course one does not bathe in the same river twice, and that congregation, and my theological College, have changed in very many ways over four decades, but still, the places, and the people with whom we shared that time together, awaken memories long stored away in the recesses of the mind.

It seems good to look back, good to come back to the starting point, to the place, and to the people, who evoke significant memories for us, memories of the planting of faith, the stirring of hope, and the experience of God's love. Today on Christian Family Sunday we are for one thing encouraged to look back, honour our mothers, and acknowledge what they have given us, especially at the beginning of our lives. And yet looking back, or going back, can sometimes be strange and even disappointing.

We are still in the season of Easter, and so we are remembering the women who "came back", very early in the morning on the first day of the week. But when they got there, prepared to do some remembering, probably with tears, of all that they had seen and heard before all this, of Jesus, the man who had moved them, inspired them, won their loyalty and their devoted love, the message they were given was short and to the point:

"You are looking for Jesus . . .

"He is not here . . .

"He is going ahead of you. . ." [Mark 16:6-7]

Sometimes, if what we are really wanting to do is find Jesus, going back is not the best thing to do. Because he doesn't stay put at the place we may have thought we had left him. He goes ahead of us, and we meet Him, as with our trust place in Him, we fully engage the present moment.

Consider the story of Philip and the Ethiopian. This story was one that I studied in a small group as delegates came together from all over the world in Salvador, Brazil, for the World Council of Churches Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, in the closing weeks of 1996. In my small group were a Baptist woman from the USA, a Congregationalist man from Hawaii, a most

gracious couple from the Anglican Church in the Solomon Islands, a layman from the Church of North India, and a minister from the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. I came to the study thinking of the passage as a wonderful example of sensitive missionary work. Philip approached the Ethiopian official as he was prompted by the Holy Spirit to do so. Philip sat beside him as the man was reading from a scroll of Isaiah. Philip asked caring questions to discover where the Ethiopian was in his spiritual journey. Beginning at that place Philip declared the good news, the Ethiopian was converted, baptized, and went on his way rejoicing.

But when my friend from the Presbyterian Church in Ghana, in our small group in Salvador, Brazil, was considering the story, he was troubled by one fact: we're told Philip's name, but we never learn the name of the Ethiopian. Yet that Ethiopian may have been the one who went back to his homeland and been the real founder of the very ancient Christian church there. "That's just the way missionary stories are still being told," he complained. "The pioneer missionary goes out from England or Scotland or America, and as a result of his courageous journey and extraordinary faith, converts are made, a church is born, and people flock to believe in their thousands and tens of thousands. But we don't hear the names of those first converts of his, who do all the hard work of interpreting the Gospel to their own people in terms of their own culture and the images and metaphors of their own language." The man from India spoke, and said that was exactly what had happened in the case of the mass conversions of the "untouchables" in his country. The Congregationalist layman from Hawaii spoke about the glory given to the pastor from the USA who founded his congregation, a glory that cast his own father's lifetime of quiet and faithful ministry to his own Hawaiian people into undeserved shadow.

It was a penetrating discussion. The Ghanaian minister listened carefully as members of the group gave expression to a new dimension of discovery about a very familiar story. We realized in a new way that Philip didn't carry the Gospel all by himself to the Ethiopian official. It dawned on us that the Spirit of Jesus had gone before Philip, to give the Ethiopian an enquiring and seeking mind, to motivate him to come to Jerusalem to worship God and obtain a scroll so he could read the Scripture for himself. Philip was enabled to tell him good news because the Risen Jesus had gone ahead of him and prepared the ground for the hearing of it.

Then we looked at our Ghanaian friend's name tag, all neatly typed as all of ours were. "Where did you get the name 'Wexford'?" someone asked. "Oh, that's the name they gave me when I went to a Church of Scotland school in Ghana," he said. "My African names weren't good enough. They said I had to have a 'Christian' name. So my Dad put down 'Wexford'. I've always hated that name." The next day, when we gathered together, we noticed that 'Wexford' had been crossed out on his name tag, and his African given names were boldly hand-printed above. He had to wait most of his lifetime, as a Christian and even as a minister, to make the discovery, as our group was gathered, that his real name mattered in the sight of fellow-Christians and in the face of Christ. The Risen Jesus had come ahead of him, ahead of all of us, to Salvador, Brazil, and he showed us His hands and His side; but He came to value us all for who we were, to call us by our very own names, and to help us value the many others who are partners with us in God's mission. Time and time again, my own experience in ministry and missionary service has confirmed the truth that the Risen Christ is always going ahead of us. Once, two days after we had delivered our youngest daughter to her first-year university residence, in the fall of 1993, Viola and I were flying to our International Ministries appointments in Central America,

and were wandering around, somewhat bewildered, during a stopover in the airport in Houston. At a little kiosk we looked at the small items that were for sale, and then one of the two black women who were at the counter spoke up.

"Would you like a thought for today?" she asked. And with a big smile she handed us a small piece of paper, on which had been neatly typed, "The Lord will watch over your going out and your coming in, from this time forth, and even for evermore." Psalm 121.

We were astounded. That Psalm was part of a family tradition that went back to Viola's side of the family. Her father, a Mennonite from Russia, always read that Psalm as the last thing before anyone set out on a journey, and our family had continued that practice. Now here were these humble Baptist women, with a little ministry, of sharing a thought for today when it seemed right to them to do so, and they told us that pilots often walked by and asked them for a fresh one. For us what they did for us became a tangible sign that the Risen Christ was indeed going ahead of us. His people were accompanying us as we journeyed with some trepidation to our overseas missionary adventure.

"He is going ahead of you . . ." With this same Easter word in mind we come to the familiar words of Jesus that we read from John's Gospel, in which our Lord represents the relationship between Himself and his followers in the image of the vine and the branches. I have always heard these words as above all being about how vital it is for us who believe in Jesus, who are the "branches" in this picture, to stay connected to our roots by holding ourselves fast to Jesus, the vine. It is deeply important for branches to stay connected to the main stalk, to the vine. It is important for the church, and for each of us as Christians, to hold fast to the apostolic witness which we find as we read the Scriptures. To look back to our beginnings can help us, as the apostle writes in Ephesians [3:17], to be "rooted and grounded in love".

And yet . . . holding on is not the only task of a branch. Jesus makes clear that branches are also called to bear much fruit. And for that a branch does not turn in on itself, point back towards the gnarled old vine that connects it to the soil and to the water; instead it reaches outwards and upwards. It seeks the sunlight, so that nutrients coming from the roots by way of the vine might be transformed using the sun's light and energy into something entirely new, into flowers and then into sweet fruit. That reaching for the light is so important that pruning is often called for to allow light to continue to reach the branches, so that branches already bearing fruit may bear even more fruit.

If the branch that is St. David's Presbyterian Church is alive and well after 231 years, I believe that must be because we have held fast to the faith once delivered to us, and stayed connected firmly to that vine that for 2000 years has joined the church to its historic roots in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From our beginnings this congregation has been "rooted and grounded in love." But there is another factor that makes our continuing life possible. Down through the decades and generations we have grown upwards and outwards and opened ourselves to the Light. Jesus says, "I am the vine"; Jesus also says, "I am the Light of the world." The Risen Christ is present to us, to make us fruitful branches in God's vineyard, as we have been joined to Christ and abide in Him as both Vine and Light. Generations of people at St. David's have also been willing for our life and ministry to become more focused, so that Christ who is both vine and light might continue to make us fruitful, and allow us to continue becoming his disciples, to the glory of God the Father.

What is true in the life of a congregation is also true in our individual lives as Christians. Each one

of us have a two-fold task: to remain connected, and to reach to the light, so our lives might reveal something of the glorious reality of the Risen Christ, might offer to our neighbour what by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has been formed in us: something beautiful, something sweet, something true, something good.

Today you may wonder whether your life could blossom and bear fruit like that. Today you may wonder whether your life does honour to the mother who gave birth to you, to the parents who gave you strong roots. Today is certainly a day to look back and be thankful for those parents who gave you a start in life. But parents, though they love their children dearly, do not really want their children holding on to them for dear life, for all their lives. Parents give you strong roots; they also offer you freedom to grow, outwards and upwards, in response to the light. We honour them not only by remembering them today, but also by living our own lives to the full, by reaching for the place where the Light of Christ transforms our water into wine.

I was trying to explain what I wanted to say in my sermon today to my oldest daughter, Dawna, as in the course of my journey over the last two weeks I was visiting with her and her husband Gary, in their new home in Dubuque, Iowa. She listened, and then she went over to her CD player and put on a song for me to hear. The song's musical beauty is something I cannot convey to you today, but its words were so apt that I want to leave you with them, wonderful words penned by a 14th century Persian poet:

"How did the rose ever open
How did the rose ever open its heart,
And give to this world all of its beauty?
"How did the rose ever open
How did the rose ever open its heart,
And give to this world all of its beauty?
"It felt the encouragement of light,
It felt the encouragement
Of light against its being.
"Otherwise we all remain too frightened.
Otherwise we all remain too frightened."
[Shans-ud-din Hafiz, c. 1320-1389, Persia]

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, on this Christian Family Sunday, do not remain too frightened! I want to encourage you in the name of Christ to celebrate your family roots, and also your spiritual roots, and continue growing towards the light. I want to encourage you to be conscious of how large is the family to which we belong, a family not only of our fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, but one that embraces the whole of humankind, through Jesus Christ. I encourage you to consider afresh how your life has been nurtured, and everything creative in you has been made possible, because Christ who is both vine and light, abides in you. Finally, I give you this astonishing family prayer in words from Ephesians 3 [14-19]. It sums up so much of what I wanted to say today - listen to it, pray it for yourself and for your family, and be amazed, as I have been amazed afresh, at God's goodness and grace:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.
I pray that, according to the riches of his glory,
he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being
with power through his Spirit,
and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,
as you are being rooted and grounded in love.
I pray that you may have
the power to comprehend, with all the saints,
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,
so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." AMEN.