

WHOSE JOB DO YOU WANT?

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
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Sometimes reading the Bible can be painful, or at the very least it can bring back painful memories. I've told this story before, but, since many of you are new here, I'll tell it again. (The story from the Gospel lesson was about the inability to be a prophet in your home town, after Jesus angers the crowd.)

During my first year at Acadia University, I went home for Christmas and went to a New Year's party at a friend's house. Now, I hope I don't need to explain what happens at New Year's parties in Cape Breton, suffice it to say that things were well underway when I arrived, and a guy came up to me, and said, "Are you that priest?" Now, I could have said, "No, actually, I'm a Protestant. Back in the 1500s people became frustrated with the church for being corrupt, and Martin Luther decided to nail his ideas to the cathedral door, which launched the Protestant reformation..." but I didn't say that. What I did say was, "Yeah", at which point he wound up and punched me, giving me (to this day) the only black eye I've ever had. **Note: He contacted me after that an apologized, and now always says hello to me when he sees me, and apologizes some more!*

There are two quick lessons from that story: First, you can't be a prophet in your home town; and second, if anyone ever asks you if you're a priest, say 'no.'

Garrison Keillor, in his most recent article posted on Salon.com, talks about the dangers of anonymity. Because people on the internet are anonymous, they say harsh things in discussions that they would never say if they had to sign their name. Road rage is anonymous, and it's easy to get angry at someone you don't know who has just cut you off. War requires people, who are otherwise well brought up, to do vicious things to people who are unknown to them. Yet, Keillor wants to also believe in the kindness of strangers. People within my own social circle in the past few weeks have shown pictures of someone getting pushed out of the snow; one woman reported seeing children at the airport, coming from Haiti to live with new families. Keillor argues that the centre of civility is not the small town where people tend to be kind to each other, but the big city where you have to subdue being aggressive, and extend kindness to strangers. One of the things that people new to Moncton say to me a lot is how hard it is to meet people.

One day, in the big city, Garrison Keillor decided to go to church. He writes of that experience: "And here, this morning, in a city famous for eccentricity, we strangers in a cathedral, embrace other people's children and promise to fight the good fight in their behalf, a ceremony that never fails to bring tears to my eyes. We renounce evil powers. I renounce isolation and separation and the splendid anonymity of the Internet and the doink-doink-doink of the clicker propelling me through six Web sites in five minutes. I vow to put my feet on the ground and walk through town and make small talk with clerks and call my mother on the phone and put money in the busker's hat. We welcome the infants into our herd and though some of them sob bitter tears at the prospect, they are now in our hearts and in our prayers and we

will not easily let them go.” *(From the article, Social Separation Breeds Contempt: There is no better place to learn the delicate ballet of social skill than in a big city, from Salon.com January 12, 2010.)*

In Luke, Jesus returns from the anonymity of the big city to his home town. “Isn’t that Joseph’s son?” In one sentence, the Lord of Lords is transformed into Joseph’s son - you know the one who used to drop the hammer all the time and once nailed his sleeve to the wall... We’ve all had the experience of going away to be someone and find ourselves, and coming back home to being your plain old self among people who know you and your parents and your grandparents. Yet, something is different. Last week, when Stretch invited the children to come up for story time, one of them said to him, “You’re not Aaron!” They knew something was different. One gets the sense from the story that Jesus has been away for some time. As was the custom in the synagogue, they invite the guest to read the scripture and reflect on it. Yet, in the middle of all that, Jesus has done something that has transformed the story which they heard - about release to the captives and sight to the blind - into something that’s real and happening now. It ceases to be a story when he tells it. He reads it as if it is actual fact. The old story from the dusty scroll now is more than just wishful thinking - it’s fact; these things have been fulfilled: jubilee, sight, freedom. Now we are to live them, and to help others live them.

I was smiling as I was reading an article by a software engineer and project manager that said, “Hitting a wall? Sometimes pushing an idea from the inside-out, doesn't work. Sometimes you need an outside-in approach. One of my mentors has a simple way to phrase this -- "Use the system to educate." It's along the lines of, "you can't be a prophet in your hometown..." Sometimes the change agent

needs to be external. 2000 years since Jesus, and yet Luke is being quoted in modern-day article about career development.

That same article about career development asked an interesting question that took me by surprise. “Whose job do you want?”

I sometimes wonder about that exact place where church and society begin to diverge. After all, St. Paul says that love is not envious. Still, we’re human. During a recent conversation about whether or not we should put flowers and trees in front of our church, because of other projects we want to do, we wondered if we should because of the expense and upkeep of such a thing. Then someone said, “Well, St. George’s Anglican has flowers in front of their church!”

So whose job do you want? It’s an interesting question when asked within Christianity. What skills do you have that will help our church continue to grow? How are you able to contribute your abilities so that we can have a vibrant community of faith? But the difference is, I’m not asking today for people to fill ten committees and to volunteer one hundred hours at the church. I’m looking for spiritual leaders who reflect their faith in daily life.

I visited with a couple recently who offered something great: we can be here when we’re not working and studying - the ministry of presence. A woman in our church gave me a stack of home-made cards to send out to new people or to those who are sick. Someone else called me one night and asked what I thought about having a concert at the church to raise money for Haiti. When another woman heard about it, she came in on Friday with a fantastic idea to help increase the fund-raising for Haiti. It all starts out with how we model our lives.

When you think about people in your own life who have been an inspiration to your faith, what is it they did to inspire you? Be more like them? Inspire someone by being a good person? Inspire someone by being a great co-worker? Inspire someone with quiet words of support by email or by phone? And, if you want my job, speak to me after church as the United Church of Canada is currently experiencing a clergy shortage.

A few months ago, I was having lunch at the Pumphouse, and as I was leaving, two children from our Church School were there with their grandfather having lunch. I hadn't met him, and his granddaughter said, "Grampy, this is our Prime Minister!" I laughed all the way back to the Church.

The reason I ask about the people who inspire you to be a better person is because, not unlike the story from Luke, these are people who bring stories to life. Peace, compassion, giving sight, opening hearts, and resurrection, are all just nice stories until someone comes along with a vocation for life, and peace becomes real. Seeing again becomes real. Resurrection becomes real. They move from being just concepts to a way of life and living.

I was in a line-up at a store recently when the cashier asked the woman in front of me about the angel pinned to her lapel. She said it was in honour of her mother who had recently died. The woman at the cash register welled up and said she had lost her mother two years ago and is really missing her now. My instinct was to say something, but instead I just observed as these two women ministered to each other. What I felt was that there is nothing, not death, nor angels nor principalities that can separate us from the love of God.

As Paul says, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on

its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Nothing can separate us from the love of God; not our feelings, our actions, or even our beliefs.

I want to re-share this with all of you as we continue to figure out what we believe and don't believe as people of faith. I received this reading from a friend of mine, in her own struggle with ordained ministry in another denomination. It gave her strength, and I hope it is of value to each of you as well. I should note that this could not be read in most churches this morning; however, I think it's important enough to risk it. I hope it gives you encouragement, and if it doesn't, I hope it gives you something to think about at the very least. It reminds us at the end of the day that our 'job' or vocation as Christians is to be faithful not to a church, or a person, but to God. In our service to others, we come face to face with that God.

LEAVING HOME

Written by the Rev. David Keighly (A priest in the Church of England)

I'm off!

I must leave the political and ethical compromises that have corrupted the faith of my Jesus.

I must leave the stifling theology, the patriarchal structures.

I must leave the enduring prejudices based on our God-given humanity, the colour of my skin, my gender or how my sexual orientation is practiced.

I must leave the mentality that encourages anyone to think that our doctrines are unchangeable.

I must leave the belief of those who insist that our sacred texts are without error.

I must leave the God of miracle and magic.

I must leave the promises of certainty, the illusion of possessing the true faith.

I must leave behind the claims of being the recipient of an unchallengeable revelation.

I must leave the neurotic religious desire to know that I am right, and to play at being God.

I must leave the claim that every other pathway to God is second-rate, that fellow Hindu searchers in India, Buddhists in China and Tibet, Muslims in the Middle East and the Jews of Israel are inadequate.

I must leave the pathway that tells me that all other directions will get me lost.

I must leave the certain claim that my Jesus is the only way to God for everyone.

I must leave the ultimate act of human folly that says it is.

I must leave the Church, my home.

I must leave behind my familiar creeds and faith-symbols.

I can no longer stay in an unliveable place.

I must move to a place where I can once again sing the Lord's song.

I must move to where my faith-tradition can be revived and live on.

I must move to a place where children don't tell me what I believe is unbelievable, but tell me they can believe what I believe.

I must move to a place where they are not playing at moving the deck chairs on the decks of an ecclesiastical Titanic.

I can never leave the God experience.

I can never walk away from the doorway into the divine that I believe I have found in the one I call the Christ and acknowledge as "my Lord."

I must move to dangerous and religiously threatening places.

I must move to where there is no theism, but still God.

I'm off! But to where, God only knows.

