

"I Say to You, Rise"

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB
For the 85th Anniversary of the United Church of Canada
June 6, 2010

Note: The research for this sermon relies heavily on three sources: Owen Chadwick's, "The Reformation"; David L. Tiede's commentary on Luke; and Gerry Dayton's delightful and thorough history of St. John's United Church, "A Monument to Faith."

Once there was a golden age. We tend to think of it as the 40's, 50's and 60's. People went to church back then. People all believed one thing and they sang about it, wrote about it, talked about it, and learned about it. Sometimes it meant coming to the church in the afternoon. Either way, you had to put chairs in the aisles. Ministers were different, too. They just seemed holier. If they weren't at your house for a meal, they were at someone else's. They always seemed to be older, and a little wiser. The Sunday School was full. Everyone wore their best suit and best dress. And there was a lot to be happy about when it came to the church.

Of course, this phenomenon doesn't belong to the modern church. Church writers through the ages have all looked at things through a rose-coloured glass. Owen Chadwick, who is one of the greatest writers of church history, wrote in his book on the Protestant Reformation, "The word reformation shows that this quest for better things was characteristically medieval in looking backwards for its model and its standard" rather than looking toward the future, or to what God is doing today. "Once there was a golden age," he writes. "There was devotion, fervour, religion, holy priests, purity of heart. But now that ancient age of gold has degenerated imperceptibly into silver, from silver to wood, from wood to iron." He's describing what people thought in the 15th century of the church in its 'golden years'.

Three hundred years before that, St. Bernard of Clairvaux (for whom our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters next door are named) wished, before he died, to see the church as it was in ancient days, when the apostles cast their nets for souls, and not for gold and silver. Some thought that when Constantine, who was emperor, gave the church wealth that the golden age of Christianity had been ruined. Some still think that way.

Now I want to fast forward a little bit into the future. Much like today's debt crisis in North American and in European countries like Greece, the church faced one, too. In the early 1400s the church had been living way beyond its means, and even Pope Innocent had to pawn his

tiara in 1484. Popes before and after continued to spend beyond their means. Banks of the era extended credit to them, and interest rates soared for the church, and therefore the church passed on these costs to the people through inventive ways. Popes needed credit, and so did Archbishops. And it was because of this need that something finally gave out in the eyes of the people who at one time made fun of church leaders in pubs and in homes because of their ability to buy positions within the church (and the corruption within it). They were dependent upon the church, they needed it. No one argued with the beliefs, just with the politics of the church. Now their criticism extended into the public.

In order to help pay for things such as construction, and interest on debt, the church began issuing indulgences, which were basically gifts issued by the church that you could buy in order to help your loved one who was stuck between heaven and earth in 'purgatory'. Part of that money went to the Pope and the rest of it went to the bankers to whom the church was in debt. It was rather ingenious when you think about it, but it did so much damage to their image and public relations that BP's problems today would seem like a walk in the park.

Sales people walked from place to place, preaching about purchasing these Indulgences. People were left with the impression that by purchasing an indulgence they were helping a loved one in the afterlife. Sales people were getting very good at promoting them. You could almost say that a line they would hear would be, "The moment the money tinkles in the collecting box, a soul flies out of purgatory."

Martin Luther was a professor at the University of Wittenburg. He had been troubled over the concept behind indulgences, and the sale of them. One of the things that was important to Luther's theology was the idea of confessing our sins. Indulgences gave the impression that people no longer needed to do that, so long as one was purchased. Because of this, among other things, Luther reached his tipping point.

The legend has it that on All Saints' Eve, October 31st, 1517, Martin Luther fastened to the church door in Wittenburg a letter of complaint called the Ninety Five Theses upon Indulgences. He was willing to argue them in public. He spoke from his heart as well as his head against all that he saw wrong. He believed that the leaders of the church had no idea what was happening, and that he would rather see a building in ruins than to be built on the backs of the poor.

Luther was thirty-three years old. He had a loud sense of humour, but often didn't have the wit to match it. He came from poverty before he was a monk, and his friends respected him, probably because he never held anything back and spoke his mind.

Suffice it to say, there have been thousands of books written on this topic. Courses are taught year after year about the beginnings of the church as we know it. I've spoken with friends of mine who are Roman Catholic priests who have agreed that the reformation needed to happen. Pope Benedict himself has even forgiven Luther, saying that Luther never intended to split the church, just to purge it of corruption. I would be embarrassed if my church history professor the Rev. Dr. Gordon MacDermid could hear this because of how much I am leaving out, though I was sad to learn of his death last year. In his honour, I used the book he recommended to research some of this sermon. I asked Gordon the year I was ordained if he had any advice for the church of the future for those of us just getting into ministry, since he knew its history so well. He thought for a second, looked me straight in the eye, and said, "Nope."

Nearly 100 years later, after great turmoil, things began to change for the better. As Owen Chadwick writes, "In Christianity, there was more teaching, more preaching, more pastoral care, better education, and better understanding of the faith not just by clergy but also by the whole congregation. There was less superstition and more religion. There was less intellectualism" and more faith. People began to place just as much emphasis on the word as they did the symbols. Though, some Catholics wanted more preaching, and some Protestants still lifted up the sacraments as being most important.

In many, often horrible ways, the Reformation brought out the worst in many people. Even though great changes had been made, the protestant church evolved into some pretty messy organisms, many of which still exist today that market in fear rather than in justice and mercy.

The protest of the Reformation was that salvation was not by outward act, or by a fellow human being, or by going somewhere else, yet by faith alone. We are justified by faith alone, wrote Luther. Salvation comes from God. That's what makes us "Protest"ants.

That takes us up to about 1700. According to the doctoral thesis of Frank Archibald, a former pastor of St. John's, the first Protestants landed on these shores back in 1605. Yet, in 1783, a number of Presbyterians landed in Saint John on a boat. They came from all parts of Europe, and within their history they would have well-remembered stories from the Reformation. I'm sure some of them were hoping to leave some of that behind. In 1829, an Irish minister with the Reformed Church in Ireland, the Rev. Alexander Clarke, spent 10 days getting here with his wife and two daughters. There were no roads, no bridges, and the main method of travel was by foot or by horse. Though he wasn't a Presbyterian, his first sermon while he lived in Amherst was preached to seven Presbyterians in a barn, probably in wet clothing. Alexander was a strong man, and we also know he was large. He was also a farmer who often said, "I thrash the sinners on Sunday, and the grain the rest of the week." His church grew from seven, to fifty taking communion together, and five years later there were nearly 600 members of that church.

Presbyterian missionaries and clergy began coming from all over, including the Rev. James MacGregor who came at the later end of the 1700s and beginning of the 1800s. The story goes that one day he became lost near Peticodiac because the trees were so thick. He felt the need for a rest; however, unfortunately his horse didn't. By the time he noticed, the horse was long gone. He was in trouble. It was getting dark, and he had been walking for quite some time. He fell to his knees in prayer, and asked God for help. When he opened his eyes, he could see his horse. He would later tell the story as an example of the power of prayer. My theory is that he just put his glasses back on!

In the early 1800s, Moncton had a few pubs, but no churches. People felt a disconnect. Ministers were coming through the city, preaching where ever they could, preaching in homes mostly. Through many discussions with local families, land was given to build what is known as the Free Meeting House over on Steadman and King Streets. What's beautiful about that building is that it was meant for all churches: Baptists, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Jewish people, Pentecostals, and even Presbyterians! It was the Old Union Church.

In November of 1838, a minister came through Moncton, who met with the Presbyterians here. And this is the first beginnings of what we now know as St. John's over 170 years later. One thing we need to remember about this time is that for another eight years, the people were without a minister, after he left. There wasn't a Presbyterian minister in Shediac, Moncton, or Salisbury. It was the Elders and congregation that held itself together, which is why we place such importance on Elders here. Finally, a minister educated in Halifax came to Moncton. He was too young to be ordained, so they gave him a chance to get some experience, and they ordained him. He brought them together for some important moments including baptisms, weddings, and funerals, even though they were a small group of people.

After he left, the Rev. James Murray arrived, and his ministry was mostly confined to Moncton. The group that remained were merely fourteen families. It's hard to believe but there are still a few founding families still in this congregation. (Jean Barks was a MacKenzie, one of the founding families.) They built their first church up on Mountain Road called St. John's. A few minister's later, and the congregation had grown so much that they needed a new building, which they built where we are sitting today. It burned down, and as of 1914 you're sitting in their labour of love.

I know this is a bit of historical whiplash, but I have told you this story today on the anniversary of the United Church of Canada because I want us all to have a sense of how much it took to get us to where we are, whether we've been coming here all of our lives, or even just today. You are now part of that story.

In 1925, our minister, Dr. Ramsey (whose daughter in law Helen is still part of St. John's), didn't preside over construction or a fire, but rather it was something far more difficult: church union. In this very sanctuary where we now sit eighty five years ago, people were invited to come to the pulpit to speak for or against church union. 473 people voted in favour of it, and 56 against. Our Phyllis Hicks was just seven months old at the time. Sarah Lesperance's grandfather was a signatory to the United Church, The congregation spoke its mind, as we have on many other matters. Sometimes with our votes, and yes sometimes sadly, with our feet. But in the end, today we are a part of the United Church of Canada. Interestingly enough, despite the exodus of some members, the congregation grew that year because the vision for church union was strong in these parts.

What strikes me about this story I've just told you is the amount of compassion within it. I imagine the Psalmist sitting at a table with a parchment perhaps hidden from the sun as he or she writes down words that tell us not to put our trust in mortals in whom there is no help, but to put our hope in God, what a moment that must have been. I think of the prayers of St. Bernard who longed for a simpler faith closer to Jesus without riches, a faith that consisted merely of nets and salt; of love and the Gospel. The concern and frustration of Luther was that poor people were being taken for granted. The idea that nothing blocked people from God, not a person, not an idea, and that faith was available to all of us unshackled and free. The compassion Alexander Clarke had for that first group of seven and how he went on to build fifteen more churches before he died. What it must have been like to be James McGregor falling to your knees in the woods and praying for a horse. I think of all the people around this area who didn't know what to do for faith so they all gathered together to talk about it. They didn't do it alone. They didn't buy a book and call themselves 'spiritual'. They sacrificed. They shared in compassion, and they had a vision for their church. They knew that faith was best expressed, studied, and shared in a group of people who sought goodness for life, too.

And God is just as present today as in those first times when people gathered in homes to tell stories of Jesus. God is just as present today as in those early years of bishops and popes. God is just as present today as in those times when people "hammered" pieces of paper to church doors to say something isn't right, something is going wrong, and people are not being cared for. God is just as present today as God was during the golden years. That has not, nor will ever, change. And today, we rejoice in that. We simply rejoice in it.

Compassion needs to be at the heart of this church. Not just God's compassion for us, and not just your compassion for someone else. Compassion is something that is done with you and to you. Compassion is one of the words that just seems too easy to be spoken from our lips. But really, it should be said with reverence and with awe. Compassion is both one of the most powerful and mysterious emotions of an individual. It is an emotion bursting with

contradictions -- of crying and laughing, hurting and healing, receiving and giving. The word compassion comes from the Latin stem 'compati' meaning "suffer with". In English the definition of compassion is to suffer together with another. It is a quality that brings people together.

It is with compassion that Jesus looks at a mother walking beside the dead body of her son as it is carried out of the town. He has compassion for her and he tells her not to cry. Jesus reaches over, and he simply touches the stand on which the body rests, and speaks the words, "Young man, I say to you, rise." Compassion is important in Luke's Gospel. Jesus understood that to be a widow was a sentence to poverty. At his own death, he commends the care of his mother to a friend. "Young man, I say to you rise." He speaks those words from a place of compassion.

Those words are for today. And we need them just as badly. We need them for our world, we need them for our oceans, we need them for places that are dead to war and violence, we need them for our addictions and our habits, we need them for our church, we need them for our friends, we need them for our partners, we need them for our children, for our grandchildren, and for ourselves. These words of Jesus speak to our thoughts of death, to that which ceases to bring life within us. "I say to you, rise." Not as you once were, but as you will be. Not as you have done, but as you will do.

God be with you.