

ART FOR LIFE: A HOPEFUL RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard at
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Oscar Wilde, who visited Moncton in 1882, said that “All that I desire to point out is the general principle that life imitates art far more than art imitates life.” I’m not sure that I agree with Oscar Wilde on that statement. As well as a talented writer and poet, he was a social agitator who loved theatrics. He was loathed and loved in most places he visited. Newspapers would print scathing caricatures of him. When he came to Moncton, for example, we arrested him for breach of contract!

I believe the reverse of Oscar, actually. I believe that art reflects life. Not just the pretty landscapes, brilliant sunsets, and portraits of people but the chaos of life as well. Sometimes, paintings reflect the fact that life is not linear and straight-forward; however, ours is abstract existence with colours splashing together, lines intersecting, where layers of meaning are added.

If art reflects life, then it can be many things. Art can express the tears generated by the greatest of heart breaks. Art can reflect the intimacy of a kiss. Art can reflect the emotion of isolation of the soul and being alone in a city. Art can reflect the humour within our daily lives. And, it can express our greatest joy.

Painter Henri Matisse said that “a picture must possess a real power to generate light and for a long time now I've been conscious of expressing myself through light or rather in light.”

Dieppe Artist Matt LeBlanc would agree with that statement. Using pallet knives and heavy-body paint, with an extra wide brush, Matt transforms a blank, white canvas into a celebration of ideas through colours, shapes, and layers. When Matt paints, he listens to up tempo music: rock, hip hop, rap, jazz. He has no preference...just something to help him go with the flow of his painting. “Art” says Matt, “always creates a reaction.” Some artists can create negative pieces; however, Matt refers to himself as a “very positive person.” That positive energy gets poured into each of his paintings. He has had an incredible response.

Indeed, Matt’s paintings reflect life. Before Matt was born, his older sister died from cancer. Her name was Madeline, and she was five years old. His parents never recovered. Matt wondered what it was that he could do to honour such a significant loss in his family, and he thought of different ways. It occurred to him, “I can do art.” Simply giving his art away to different causes wasn’t enough, and he felt that he needed to do more. As he says, “Cancer never sleeps.” Matt was also influenced by stories of friends who have suffered because of cancer.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

When I visited his art studio, it was obvious to me that Matt has opened himself to the suffering of not only people he loves, but also to those whose stories have affected him. I love seeing where people work. On one wall, Matt has slashes of paint where he tests colours. On another wall hang his inspired creations. Matt has adopted battle language. He refers to the battle that people often face doesn’t happen in

one day, it happens over time, which is why he created the “Art for Life” campaign, as he will complete two hundred paintings over six months. The proceeds will be given to the Tree of Hope campaign at the Dumont hospital. Potentially \$25,000 can be raised. (<http://www.mattleblancart.com>)

Why I lift up what Matt is doing is because so often we feel powerless in the face of something so big. He has transformed that into something positive by doing what he can with the gifts he has been given. Though he may not describe it this way, he has given an action plan to turn his suffering into endurance, his endurance into character, the result of which is hope for the people around him and in a very real way it honours Madeline, the story that inspired his own transformative and artistic journey.

Today we speak of the Trinity. It’s a Sunday that happens each year in which we reflect on the nature of God. In a way, creation is the canvas of God: God being poured out upon creation bringing life. However that happens for you – whether it is with broad energetic strokes, pushing you into a direction; or, whether it is with a gentle and precise brush, creating within you a place where the holy can dwell, the Trinity is an image of God as an artist, reconstructing our suffering into a burning desire for life with different brushes and different colours. The Creator, giving us life, and calling us to abundant living. The Word, inspiring us to live better and to help other people live better. And the Spirit, moving us into directions we could never have imagined.

But, it’s the suffering part many of us can’t get past when it happens. Baptist pastor Gordon Atkinson describes a story in which he was spending time as a chaplain with a young mother who was dying. They both prayed that she could finish knitting something for her children. But, she died before she could. He writes, “It’s funny, when your faith finally caves, it goes all at once. You realize you were just a

shell held together with hackneyed rituals and desperate hopes. You are not strong. You do not have answers.” Gordon speaks of the darkness speaking to all of us. Whispering in our time of distress. Sometimes suffering doesn’t build endurance. It creates futility. And futility produces bitterness, and bitterness leads to hopelessness.

If we want to be real about faith, we have to be people who see joy, and people who see pain. We have to show pain to others as well, others who may choose not to see it lest it affect the way in which they live. We cannot hide our children from it. They must know about it if they are to help. Last week, a church brought in their youth group to work at the Karing Kitchen for the morning. They learned a great truth about suffering. They saw an alternate version of reality: a version where people go home hungry, and wake up hungry. And yes, thankfully, they were able to balance it with the hope of which Paul speaks. Children share our anxiety, and the church and faith must be a place where they can take it.

Part of me wonders what Trinity Sunday really means in life. A few Sundays ago, I said that this faith that we have is personal. It’s about our relationship with each other, and it’s about our relationship with God. Most recently, we baptized a baby named Cruz (who is here today at the back with his parents.) We used the words of the Trinity to start his life in faith. Gently pouring water over his head, we said that we baptized him in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We blessed him with all of our love, and we shared in the joy of his family. Many of us start out that way on our path, some of you in this very church. In the most personal of moments, each week we gather here to invoke the presence and power of God into our joy, into our suffering, into our love, and yes into our bleeding so that we too can remember, we too can know, and we too can believe in this hope that

Paul preaches that is beyond our understanding yet within our grasp. And this isn't a hope to make everything better. This isn't a hope that diminishes the suffering that people are enduring in this very moment, some of whom we love very much. It's not a hope to make something bad to go away (though that would be good). It's a hope that says we are not alone in it.

Trinity is how we understand the ways in which God approaches us. Sometimes we approach of God in different ways, yet always with reverence. Barbara Brown Taylor says that "the easiest practice of reverence I know is simply to sit down somewhere outside, preferably near a body of water, and pay attention for at least twenty minutes. It is not necessary to take on the whole world at first. Just take the three square feet of earth on which you are sitting, paying close attention to everything that lives within that small estate." (From the book, *An Altar in the World*)

Opening ourselves to God is different for all of us. Some people stand before a canvas and paint. Others work with those who are oppressed. Others fly around the world and work to build wells. Others bake or garden. Others pray and praise. Or play music, or cultivate their community. How do you open yourself to God? How do you look for hope?

It's critical that we have to take the time to reflect on where we see hope so that we can learn from that moment. To feel the grace of that love. To simply be loved for who you are, as you are, and not be left the same by that experience. There are moments when we have to stop doing, and find God in our stillness, and then there are times when God reminds us that it isn't in our stillness, it's in our practice and in our doing faith that we will see God.

Some say in suffering they hear God clearer. Others lose the sound of God's voice. Yet when we find a practice to pray,

or a practice to at the very least open ourselves to the possibility of God, in that moment, when we can finally bear what God wants us to hear, a word is spoken by the one who created you, the one who gives you life, the one who guides you, and it is the most intimate and holy of moments that deserves its own recognition in your life, and in my life, to simply say that our hope has not been disappointed. That no matter what happens, God has been poured onto the canvas of our heart, and a new story for our life has been written.

Faith is what we do when we respond to that which we cannot bear to hear.

I believe that.