

## **Abiding, Remaining, and Dwelling**

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Aaron Billard*

*St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB*

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I'd like to speak this morning about the part from John's Gospel in which a man by a pool of water cannot reach it, and he simply wishes to feel the healing offered within the water. People block him from it, some intentionally others unintentionally; however, still he cannot reach it. So I want to think about that in our context this morning as a church and as people. How do we help people find meaning and healing – and how do we prevent them from finding it either because we can't get past ourselves, or because of what we do may unintentionally be exclusionary to others seeking that kind of meaningful faith? The other moment from scripture that I am thinking about is from the reading of Acts, in which Paul and his followers go to a place where they expected to find a place of prayer. It's the ultimate passage about being a newcomer and seeing a place with new eyes. People come to this church and expect to find a place of prayer. I hope we are always seeking to be better at that.

There are several things I've noted about St. John's since I arrive here nearly six years ago. This congregation is willing to try. We've been through two amalgamation attempts, a renovation, we've allowed musical guests to perform in our sanctuary, such as Hawksley Workman, a Canadian singer songwriter that has a strong following even if many in our congregation don't know his name. What the audience didn't know is that Hawksley Workman grew up in the United Church – he even traveled across Canada with a Moderator of the United Church, the Very Rev. Walter Farquharson, playing music and singing songs to groups of people. Literally, this congregation has blown the doors open to music in all of its various forms. We have allowed for the fact that God is still speaking, and often it is through the poets, songwriters, and musicians whose reach far exceeds our

grasp. Such as the young woman at the concert that night, who throughout the set, noticed that this was still a church, and how interesting the congregation must be to allow performances (such as this.) She called the church the following week, and now they regularly attend church here after having their baby baptized.

On Friday night, I arrived here not quite knowing what to expect. I've heard chamber music before; however, the St. Jean Quartet exceeded my expectations for the kind of music that would fill this sanctuary. To be honest, there weren't that many people here. Still, the artists gave a first class performance of music that stretched across the world. What caught my attention specifically was the organist Jean Michel Alleparts playing with such ferocity that the organ was given a work out that it hasn't seen in years. He played three levels of keyboards while at the same time using the foot pedals. Owen set up a video camera and screen so that the audience could see what was happening at the organ as Jean Michel played his heart out.

All the while they were playing, my mind had been taken to different times and places. I thought about the funeral the day before for the former Mayor of Moncton, Gary Wheeler, specifically about the end of his life, his mighty intellect, and his family. I thought about this morning, and the baptism of baby Cruz and how this room has been the transition point for life, death, and life beyond death for so many people for so many years. I couldn't tell you how many babies have been baptized at this font, including Gary Wheeler. It is a starting point for us all.

The gesture is simple, really. Water, brought into the sanctuary by our custodian Patti long before you all get here. Patti told me once that she makes sure that the water is nearly hot so that by the time we get to the baptism, it's nice and warm for the babies. She has it down to a science. And when nervous parents come to the front, sometimes it's just moms by themselves with some family, and sometimes it's moms and dads, we ask some questions. The questions are fairly straight forward: Do you believe in God, will you follow the teachings of Jesus, and will you belong? The parents are mostly thinking, "I hope our baby doesn't

cry! I hope our baby doesn't cry!" and the ministers are usually thinking, "I love baptisms!"

The first baptism I did at St. John's was for Eleanor, and I was so nervous that I think I forgot her name during the ceremony. Not that long after, I held baby Kegan, who immediately grabbed the glasses off of my face and wouldn't let them go. And I'm always so amazed to see Kegan and Eleanor walking to the front of the church for children's time. We've baptized so many babies since then. We've watched our children's program slowly grow into what it has become. We joke about the baby boom at St. John's in the last number of years as parents invite other families to come along. The newspaper said last week that the service here was without pretence. And it's true. You come as you are, believing what you believe, and, with God's help, leaving this space a bit more hopeful for your life and the world around you.

You see, in this church we believe in God. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. And we believe in belonging to something. And somehow through all of that, the Spirit is at work among us. There's no "Hocus Pocus" in any of it. It's all quite basic. The spirit abides, it remains, it dwells among us. Really quite ordinary. It doesn't shove or push, it doesn't dazzle or shoot up like fireworks. It simply is found where we are, smack dab in the middle of the life we are living, whether it be good or bad. I spoke with a woman last week from the Muslim faith who attended this church regularly for years. I really have to give credit to Dr. Archibald for his ability to reach out to people without making them feel that they had to conform to just one way of thinking. People were drawn to his ministry because he respected them.

Mary's husband had just died, and I asked her, "What now?" This woman, in her nineties, replied, "Allah will provide." It's something my generation either hasn't known or is unwilling to hear, that God provides for the need within us whatever it is determined to be. Not giving us exactly what we want, but abiding, remaining, and dwelling with us.

David Lose, professor of preaching at Luther Seminary writes, "Faith, when I think about it, doesn't so much take away all the difficult things in life as makes them

bearable. It's actually a little more than that. Faith doesn't take away the difficult things in life, it just keeps them from dominating, from having mastery, from defining who I am and the possibilities around me. It's like these things – our needs, wants, broken places – they still are accurate *descriptions* of us, at least parts of us, but they no longer *define* us. We are more than what's missing. Faith understood not as some divine plug for the hole we each carry around inside of us, but rather as a summons to be more, to live and love more, to share more because there is so much more that God desires and designed for us.”

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John Dominic Crossan points out that there were two types of peace in the first century when Jesus lived. One was "peace through victory," which was the approach of the Romans. The other was "peace through justice," which was the approach of Jesus. Sifting through all of the nonsense of religion, I often find peace. I don't find peace in ancient creeds and through the puffings of preachers who somehow think they've got a line on what God is saying. I find peace in moments like I did on Friday night listening to a violinist from France who has spent his entire life mastering his craft and playing an instrument that is lighter than what you would expect to a group of people seeking meaning in life. I found peace in a man smashing his hands against an organ as his hair flew in different directions as this sanctuary was filled with sound so much so that the choir loft door to my left blew open mid-performance. I find peace sitting beside people talking about life in meaningful ways. I find peace sitting with a friend and not trying to fix things, but, rather abiding with them, remaining with them, and dwelling with them, just as the spirit does with each one of us.

I want to tell you a story, since it's Mother's Day, about a young couple who were leading a Roman Catholic Youth Group. This couple spent hours teaching kids about values and faith and morals. Before long, the young couple started dating. Who knew it would lead to where it did, but as it turned out, she became pregnant, and in the midst of their passion they were both anchored by their families who decided that such a birth would only bring shame not only to the couple but to everyone involved. The young woman gave birth to the child, who was then immediately put up for adoption, and the couple soon split up. There

was so much shame that the circumstances were covered up. A year later, the baby was living with a new family, with a new name, and both the young man and the young woman never spoke much after that. Out of that shame came some goodness, though, and some proof that the Lord is not without a sense of humour. The baby conceived by the youth group leaders grew up to be the United Church minister standing before you today.

I think that God can bring something from anything.

I've heard this next quotation ascribed to Francis of Assisi: Once asked what he would do if he thought the world would end tomorrow, Luther replied, "I would plant a tree today." That's not optimism, but hope – hope for a faith that is welcoming, new, and exciting. As we gather, are others inspired to see this as a place of prayer? And if they do, we must be prepared to dwell with them in their fear, to hope with them in their anxiety, and to simply share in this faith that reaches into all of us to inspire a better, more excellent, kind of living. Peace be with each of you, whether present on Sunday or reading this at home, or at your computer.