

Sermon *The snail and the hermit crab*

Rev. David Usher, September 23, 2012

A man and woman had been married for more than sixty years. They had shared everything. That had talked about everything. They had kept no secrets from each other except that the old woman had a shoe box in the top of her closet that she had cautioned her husband never to open or to ask her about. For all of those years, he had never thought about the box, but one day the old woman got very sick and the doctor said she would not recover. In trying to sort out their affairs, the old man took down the shoebox and took it to his wife's bedside. She agreed that it was time he should know what was in the box. When he opened it, he found two knitted dolls and a stack of money, totalling E94,357.

He asked her about the contents. "When we were to be married," she said, "my grandmother told me the secret of a happy marriage was never to argue. She told me that if I ever got angry with you, I should just keep quiet and knit a doll."

The old man was so moved. He had to fight back tears. After all these years together, only two precious dolls were in the box. She had been angry with him only two times in all those years of living and loving. He almost burst with happiness.

"My darling," he said, "that explains the dolls, but what about all this money? Where did it come from?"

"Oh," she said, "that's the money I made from selling the dolls."

I hope this is a happy congregation. I hope it is a congregation that people are pleased to come to because they are confident that here, they will find others with the warmth of welcome in their hearts. I hope it is a place where love dwells. But, even within that love, even with the commitment to treat each other with loving kindness and charity, there will always be times when each and every one of us will have to get out our knitting needles. Those of you who have been here a while, look around you. How many of you can honestly say, honestly say, that there is no-one you would prefer to avoid at coffee hour after the service.

That is one of the points of a properly loving religious community. Not that you love everyone, but that it is a conscious experiment in being in loving relationship even with those who can make you want to start knitting. A congregation is the laboratory in which you get to practise the virtues of faithful living you would otherwise only extol in theory. You think forgiveness and forbearance are virtues? Great, you will get lots of opportunities to practise them here. Come on in. You like the idea of being kind and patient and assuming another's good intentions? Perfect. We promise to test that to the max. Because, you see, here we do espouse those virtues we would like more of in this wounded world, and where better to learn how to incarnate those virtues than right here, where we can not only talk the talk, but learn together to walk the walk. Being religious is not just about being spiritual. As James Luther Adams says elsewhere in his essay, "A Faith for the Free" "*Freedom requires a body as well as a spirit. We live not by spirit alone. A purely spiritual religion is a purely spurious religion; it is one that exempts its believer from surrender to the sustaining, transforming reality that demands the community of justice and love. This sham spirituality, far more than*

materialism, is the great enemy of religion.”

But, here’s the thing. We do not come here only for our own self-improvement. As important as the health of our own spirits is, we come here for a larger purpose. We come here not to serve only those already here, but to serve those who are not already here, but who might want to be. The doors must ever be as open as our hearts to the newcomer. And, we come here to learn how to serve those who will never come here, who have their own faith or are content to say they have no faith, but who are part of the world we all share. And if that world out there is not a better place for our having been in here, in here in communion with each other as fellow travellers on the journey of humanity, and in communion with that which transcends us, which cannot be seen and which we hardly know how to talk about, but whose presence we feel and which infuses who we are and what we do; if the world out there is not a better place for our having been in here, then our being in here will have been of little purpose indeed.

Today marks a new chapter in the life of this congregation, as it learns to inhabit this space. It is a cross-roads, a time of transition, and such moments can be times of both excitement and anxiety. The snail, like the tortoise and terrapin, takes his home with him, the carapace a permanent shelter into which it can withdraw in time of danger or when in need of repose. The hermit crab has no such luxury. The hermit crab makes its home in an empty shell, but as it grows and becomes too big for that shell, it must abandon it and go looking for a new home. That is the time of the greatest danger for the hermit crab, when it has left one home but has not yet established itself in its new home. Indeed, has not even yet found a new home, and it is vulnerable to all who would predate on it. But to stay where it was would mean the slow death of not being able to grow. It would mean not being true to its own nature.

This congregation is more akin to the hermit crab than to the snail. It has no home of its own, but must take shelter in whatever friendly spaces it finds. Sometimes it has to move because it has outgrown the space, and sometimes it has to move because the space has ceased to be hospitable. But for whatever reason the move, move it must, looking forward with anticipation to the new dawn before it even as it might look longingly at the sunset behind.

But take heart. For as the British physician, psychologist and social reformer born in 1859, Havelock Ellis, wrote,

“The present is in every age merely the shifting point at which past and future meet, and we can have no quarrel with either. There can be no world without traditions, neither can there be any life without movement. There is never a moment when the new dawn is not breaking over the earth, and never a moment when the sunset ceases to die. It is well to greet serenely even the first glimmer of the dawn when we see it, not hastening towards it with undue speed, nor leaving the sunset without gratitude, for the dying light was once dawn.”

They say that an optimist is someone who, when the preacher says, “..and finally,” believes the sermon really is about to end. Well, “... and finally.”

I want to conclude with some words by Ann Tyndall, which I will adapt slightly at the end.

“This morning I walked the dog up the street. It was a perfect winter’s morning. An icy breeze was blowing. Clouds were gathered in the sky. As the sun rose the grey white sky turned to rosy smoke. The sun finally appeared in the east. Nothing extraordinary, but the

moment offered a blessing on the new day.

Such blessings have been given daily for more millions of years than we can ever imagine.

I am reminded that what will get us through times of rapid change, hard times, times of uncertainty, dangerous times, will be our ability to be blessed and fed by abiding things:

The manifold blessings of the sun rising in the morning

The song of a bird heard as if for the first time

The stillness of the night

The smile of a baby offered to you as if she had been waiting for you

The faithfulness of lovers and friends,

The hand outstretched in reconciliation,

Trembling, touching through the barriers of estrangement

Healing again and again

The persistence of Love

The persistence of Love

The persistence of Love.