

Reflection for Sunday, June 26, 2022

Called for Life

"I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God" (Philippians 1:3-11).

We sing of a church seeking to continue the story of Jesus by embodying Christ's presence in the world. The church has not always lived up to its vision. It requires the Spirit to reorient it, helping it to live an emerging faith while honouring tradition, challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement, for we are called to be a blessing to the earth.

May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

Let us pray:

O God who has made us the creatures of time, so that every tomorrow is an unknown country, and every decision a venture of faith, grant us, frail children of the day, who are blind to the future, to move toward it with a sure confidence in your love, from which neither life nor death can separate us. Amen.

A friend suggested I should reflect on what I've learned these past 45 years but that might be a very short sermon! Another friend suggested reflecting on how my mind has changed but that would probably

require more time. The most delightful quip came over two years ago by a friend during the first recorded service when he commented: “Congratulations! Cantelon. You’ve finally succeeded. You’re preaching to an empty church!

When I was interviewed for candidacy by the elders of Central United Church in Edmonton, the only assurance they needed was that--given I was following in the footsteps of my father and grandfather—it wasn’t just a foregone conclusion I would join the family business. My father was very supportive and I never felt any pressure, even during a time of indecision. My grandmothers, on the other hand, believed ministry was my calling. My grandmother Cantelon didn’t get to see me ordained; but prior to her death at the age of 94, she offered two admonishments: The day you’re not nervous when you enter the pulpit is the day you get out of the ministry; and, it is not about you, it is always about the Gospel.

I think grandma may have had the passage from I Corinthians in mind when Paul uses the examples of farming/gardening and construction to describe ministry and succession: *“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each.”* It is all about the gospel: *“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”*

Many years ago on a Sunday morning at Riverbend United Church, a woman arrived with her young daughter. She proudly pointed to the picture of Rev. Malcolm Profitt, the founding minister of Riverbend United Church, and exclaimed to her daughter: “That’s the minister who married mommy and daddy! I introduced myself but she inquired about Malcolm. When I informed her that he had accepted a call to the United Church in Didsbury, Alberta, and I was the new minister, she was clearly upset and dejected. She never returned.

This was the very danger that Paul warned against: when we equate the church with a personality. What this young woman couldn't see or was unable to see or didn't want to see, was the amazing legacy Malcolm had left. This was a legacy which consisted of a booming Sunday School with gifted teachers, especially the Sunday School superintendent who went on to attain a Ph.D. in education. She didn't want to move forward; she wanted to stay in the past.

Called for Life is our calling to serve God and neighbour in the context of the exciting new chapter in your life as a congregation and the new chapter in my life, retirement. For Jesus, it was always a case of moving forward. Jesus set his face like flint to go to Jerusalem. For us, during this pandemic, it is probably more like soft clay.

To be sure, one can only move 'ahead.' The laws of time do not permit of either standing still or moving backwards. Realism means facing not only the actual data of our situation but also the necessity of moving on. Like the would-be followers who encounter Jesus, we can't turn back; we have to keep going forward. As creatures of time we do not know, *cannot* know the future. Every tomorrow is "an unknown country," every decision "a risk." The future is in *God's* hands. For our part, all that we can do is to *trust* God.

But to go forward in faith, with confidence, means being on the lookout for alternative routes. Forward does not mean simply straightforward—'walking the line,' so to speak, from one inevitability to the next. There are, after all, *different ways of moving forward* But the God who graciously fortifies our "frail" nature, instills in us a strength that otherwise we do not have—or think we do not have, or perhaps bungle because we imagine we already have it in abundance!

So we "move toward" the future—not as those who have extraordinary vision and know everything in advance; nor on the other hand as those

blindfolded and simply waiting for whatever next step will bring, probably expecting the worst; but rather as those whose eyes are wide open, who are able to see a little way ahead, and who require a high degree of imagination. The great Karl Barth, who was convinced of the sovereignty and providence of God, wrote passionately about the responsibility of the human creature: “We are not merely the pawn in a secondary theatre of action, but the responsible person on the spot at the very heart of things, the one who decides what creation is to become.”

A travel-themed cable channel once used the tagline, “Be a traveler, not a tourist.” In other words, don’t be a mere observer of life from a safe distance; no, live it, dive into it, go *all in*. Jesus, it’s safe to say, was a traveler—and he calls us to travel with him. He was determined to travel to Jerusalem to fulfill his holy destiny. His face was set, he was steadfast, immovable, relentless. You know people like that; you can’t shake them off their course. Jesus makes it clear that only love can burn away our fear and anger. Stay focused on Jesus.

Every time we look back at what we’ve left behind, we risk losing sight of the one we are following. And Jesus is a tricky one to follow. He moves fast. He surprises us. He goes to places we don’t expect. We encounter pain and difficulty, as he did. That’s all the more reason to keep our eyes on him and trust him to lead the way.

Now the departing minister does need to actually depart. The final act of leadership is to leave. Actual physical departure is necessary—at least for a period of time—and it is mandated by The United Church of Canada. It allows you to develop an “emotional availability” to welcome a new minister—and a new team!

Reinhold Niebuhr recognized times of conspicuous change and the human plight with its limitations and possibilities. In a compelling statement he wrote:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime: Therefore, we must be saved by Hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history: Therefore, we must be saved by Faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; Therefore, we must be saved by Love.

May it be so! Thanks be to God.