

Bay of Quinte Conference Closing Service

October 20, 2018

Emmanuel United Church, Peterborough

The Reverend Dr. Alan H. Bennett
Joshua 3:1-4a; 14:16a&17 Joshua 4:1-7

“Goodbye Bay of Quinte“

I want to start with a story about Albert Einstein. This amazing physicist and mathematician was chosen in 1999 by Time magazine to be the Man of the Century – not the year – but of the entire 20th century. Although he was totally, almost unbelievably, brilliant, Einstein was apparently directionally challenged. Not a lot of people are aware of it but he actually could get lost finding his way back to his home in Princeton NJ. Neighbours there got used to helping him find his way.

The story on this occasion is about a time that Albert Einstein was traveling by train. The conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of the passengers. When he came to Einstein, the great man reached into his vest pocket, but couldn't find his ticket. He started going through all his pockets – it wasn't there. He looked into his briefcase – no luck. He looked between the seats. He just couldn't find his ticket. The friendly conductor said, “Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm certain that you bought a ticket. It's all right. Please, don't worry about it.” Einstein nodded appreciatively.

The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was about to move on to the next car, he looked back and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his lost ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, “Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, please don't worry. We know who you are. There is no problem. Please don't worry about your ticket.” Einstein stood up, brushed himself off, and said, “Young man, I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going.”

That story is not unlike our situation in the Bay of Quinte Conference – and indeed our entire United Church. What we know is that our Church is going through major changes – but we're all uncomfortably aware that we really don't know where we are going. The times, they “are a-changing” and quickly.

I was a teenager in the 1950's when the Churches were full every Sunday. It's a truism that "the rising tide lifts all boats" – and it sure did in the 1950's. It's not like that today. As far as the Church is concerned, the tide is long gone out. We're in a time of serious decline in Church attendance and we are making major changes to our United Church structure. In a short couple of months Presbyteries and Conferences will cease to exist. The Bay of Quinte Conference will be folded into two new Regions. These are huge changes – and if we know anything about change, we know that it's never smooth and people don't like it. Where are we going? How will it all work out?

Our scripture lesson from the book of Joshua was about a time of major change and uncertainty. The people of Israel were unsure of where they were going and what was going to happen to them. I have stood by the banks of the Jordan River – I expect that some of you have as well. It's not a huge river (It's not like the St Lawrence) – but in places, especially when in flood, it is certainly a barrier, and they had to cross it. But getting across the river was not their main worry.

You may recall that earlier Moses had sent a 12-person reconnaissance team into the land of Canaan to check it out. The report had not been encouraging. All twelve agreed that the land over there was rich and fertile – flowing with milk and honey, but they also reported that, "The people who live there are powerful. Their cities are fortified and large. The majority report was, "We cannot go up against those people. They're stronger than we are. They're like giants. We're more like grasshoppers." So they drew back and waited. But now they were on the move and there must have been high anxiety. We read that officers went throughout the camp, telling the people: "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests carrying it, move out from your places and follow. That way you will know the way to go, since you have never been this way before."

I like that. If you don't know what is ahead – if you have never been this way before, keep your eyes on whatever it is that contains the heart of your faith, and you will be okay. For the Israelites, crossing the river turned out to be easy. They were not met by hostile forces on the other side. And the water from the Jordan upstream had miraculously stopped flowing. They all got safely across – the women and children, the animals, and all their baggage. The whole thing took quite a few hours.

In many ways it's the same with us. We're going through a time of great change. Our sacred book says that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever – it doesn't say that the Church is that way. People tend to get this confused. Let me tell you a story that helped me

personally understand the depth of our problem. Back in April of 1995 two teenage girls in Brockville after lunch on their way back to high school were killed on the railway tracks. The CNR mainline from Montreal to Toronto goes right through the centre of Brockville. The girls had waited while one train went by, and then stepped out – right into the path of another train, going in the opposite direction. Brockville is not a big city and the entire community was in shock. I ended up doing both funeral services. One of them was held in the High School Auditorium. All the staff and all the students came as well as family members and members from the School Board. The place was packed. As I was putting the service together, I wondered what hymns I should choose. The family had left it up to me.

The first choice was easy. Everyone knows Amazing Grace. It is the one Christian hymn that has spilled over from the bounds of the sacred into the secular. Even people who never darken a Church door know Amazing Grace. The second hymn was the problem. I finally settled on “O God Our Help in Ages Past.” It was, and still is, a golden oldie – often heard on Remembrance Day. I was hoping that most would know it. We opened the service with Amazing Grace. Everyone sang – including all the students. We closed with “O God Our Help in Ages Past.” It felt like I was singing a solo. The kids stood respectfully silent. It was a totally foreign song to them. Clearly they had never heard it before.

Later, as I walked slowly back to my Church, I remember thinking if young people today don't know - have never heard of - ‘O God Our Help in Ages Past,’ we are in big trouble. It was clear to me that our 200-year-old music was not speaking to modern young people in any way. It was a foreign language to them.

So it was that slowly but surely I started making changes at Wall Street United Church in Brockville. I went to conferences about Church growth and successful Church leadership. I read books about it. Throughout those years I faced a lot of criticism. People hate change – especially in their Church. They didn't quite throw hymnbooks – although I think some would have liked to. A few people left, but the Board stood solidly behind me. The one thing that we were all certain about was this — for our Church to have any hope of survival; the status quo -- the old way of doing Church -- was not an option. I am long retired now - have been for 12 years – and a newer younger leadership has continued to guide the Church through many more changes. It is not just my thing – by any means.

What changes am I talking about? They lie in six basic categories.

1) We are a much more informal Church today. A few of the older men still come in suits and ties, but most don't. Newer members who did

not grow up in the Church show up on Sunday morning with their Tim Horton's in hand and sit at the front. They're unaware that United Church people always sit at the back.

2) Our music has changed greatly. As well as an organ we have keyboard, guitars, bass, drums, and trumpet. We still sing some of the older hymns – but we also sing a ton of contemporary, very upbeat songs. Our music is very eclectic.

3) Our technology includes a multimedia display. Our minister often includes You Tube videos in her services. It can be powerful.

4) Radical Inclusivity – Our Tag Line is: “God Loves All - So Do We.” And we mean it. We have gone out of our way to make things as comfortable as we possibly can for many who in past years have been badly hurt by the Church and certainly didn't feel like they belonged. Every year, as a congregation, we walk in the Pride Parade. It's symbolic – and so very important.

5). Like this Bay of Quinte Conference and so many of you here, we have a strong emphasis on Outreach and Mission. People like being involved and doing things. It makes such a difference. One little example – our Aboriginal Committee helped persuade our local Conservative MP (that's right a Tory) to vote for bill C-262, requiring Canada to be in compliance with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People.

It is actively caring – living out the faith – walking the walk – that gives a Church heart and soul.

The 6th Category is our approach to the faith. We try to lift up the Spirit's power to change and transform. People come to faith with both head and heart. The United Church is a major 'head' Church. Our ministers are highly educated. We like to think things through. We like studies and reports and doing theology – all of which are good. But the simple truth is, the vast majority of people, old and young are attracted to faith much more through their hearts than through their heads.

Just recently a younger guy (you can almost tell a person's age these days by the number of tattoos) – a person struggling with addiction who has started coming said to me, that he feels the presence of the Holy Spirit when he comes. He actually started tearing up as he said it. For all of us our initial attraction to something higher and better comes at a feeling level.

Last fall I attended a Rend Collective concert in Ottawa. The Rend Collective is a Christian Rock group from Northern Ireland. Their most famous piece is “My Lighthouse.”

The Lyrics go like this:

“In my wrestling, and in my doubts, in my failures, you won't walk out. Your great love will lead me through; you are the peace in my troubled sea, whoa oh, you are the peace in my troubled sea.”

It's a great piece of music. The auditorium was packed with young people – teens and twenties – more than two thousand. They sang and clapped and shouted and most stood almost the entire time.

That evening what became so clear to me is that we should never give up on the younger generation. They are seekers too – just as much as we are. One of the great things about this Conference has been its youth programme – and the number of young people who attend our events. I really hope it keeps on going.

An important key is this. People today young and old are greatly attracted to Jesus -- who he was, all that he did, and all that he means. We need to talk a lot more about him. Jesus is by far our greatest asset in reaching out to people of every age. When you read the gospels you cannot help but admire and find deeply attractive the things that Jesus taught, who he was, and what he did. He was so strong, so incredibly radical and so utterly fearless. There is nothing else that has anything like the power of Christ to make us individually into better people and collectively into a far stronger Church.

As for growing your own particular Church, there is no one-way to do it. There is no specific formula – no cookie-cutter approach. Every place and every Church is different. Not only is there is no perfect Church but none exist without problems, struggles and issues. Certainly the Church I attend has a ton of them. We have not 'arrived' and never will – for Church is a process – a journey.

Do you recall that after the people of Israel crossed the Jordan they built a memorial to their time in the wilderness using 12 stones from the river bottom – one for each tribe. They honoured their past, but then moved on into the future. It wasn't easy for them. When you read the story you know that. But in the end it was their faith that carried them through.

So it will be for us. ** Petra was right. Do you recall her words? *“When you're starting something new it's always going to feel kind of rough at first. Sometimes it won't go as planned and some things will fail but we just need to keep on walking. Things will get better and easier and good signs will appear everywhere.” – Petra's words.*

This courageous and deeply caring United Church of ours is worth all the love and support that we can give it. So, reach out. Try new things of all kinds. Don't be afraid. Get excited. And remember, remember, we are not

walking alone. The Spirit is walking beside us – watching over, energizing, and guiding every step of every day.

May God bless us all as we walk forward into an exciting new future for our United Church of Canada. Amen.

*** Petra was the youth representative that also spoke at the Conference service. (and is also Rev. Bennett's granddaughter)*