

“Celebrate Life on the Courthouse Green”

August 23rd, 2020

Rev. Kimberly Heath

Talk given by Rev. Kimberly Heath at Celebrate Life outdoor service.

Brockville is unique. It was settled by Loyalists from Connecticut — other communities around Ontario tended to be settled by Loyalists from New York. Slightly different flavour. The Courthouse is the symbol of government, establishment, and the law. It was common to have churches around the town square, but almost always they would be establishment churches: Roman Catholic, Church of England and perhaps the Church of Scotland. Our town has dissenting (or non-establishment) denominations in the most prominent position: Baptist, Presbyterian (as opposed to the Church of Scotland), Methodist and Wesleyan. (George St. closed in 1919).

The whole area was the township of Elizabethtown, but they wanted a more distinctive name. It could have been Williamstown after Loyalist Reformer William Buell, or Charlestown after the Loyalist Tory Charles Jones. They fought so much about it that the town was nicknamed “Snarlington”! Finally they opted for the less divisive name of Brockville, after Sir Isaac Brock who died in the battle of Queenston Heights.

There have been a lot of divisions over the years. In the 1830’s (leading up to the Lower and Upper Canada Rebellions of 1837-38) Wall Street Church hosted the reformer William Lyon Mackenzie. This was against the wishes of the minister, Rev. Anselm Green, who had no use for politics in the church. Mackenzie wanted reform. Ogle Gowan, who was very prominent in the Orange Order (ultra British) opposed Mackenzie, and a giant fight broke out. It started in the church and moved here to the Courthouse Green. It has been debated whether you could call it a riot or not, but windows were smashed and it was a huge brawl.

These are some of the things I think about when I stand on the Courthouse Green. Such a wonderful space, so steeped in history.

So you think 2020 is bad! It is. But remember there have been conflicts and crap all through time and history. Still, it is has not been an easy year.

The musical soundtrack from the show “Hamilton” has been my go-to playlist in these Covid times. Yesterday while doing a graveside service for a member of our congregation who died, the song “Wait for It” was going through my head. And strangely when I got home my daughter was humming that song. It goes:

*Life doesn't discriminate between the sinners and the saints
It takes and it takes and it takes.
And we keep living anyway we rise and we fall and we break,
we fall and we make our mistakes.
And if there's a reason I'm still alive when so many have died
Then I'm willin' to-then I'm willin' to-Wait for it..Wait for it..Wait for it...*

*Life doesn't discriminate between the sinners and the saints.
It takes and it takes and it takes.* Isn't that true? This pandemic certainly does not discriminate. During this pandemic I have learned that I can't control anything.

But when there is something big that you can't control—like a pandemic, like a diagnosis, like a death or a significant breakdown in relationship—we tend to try to control smaller things. We control our environment. We control our routines. We might try to control other people. There are all sorts of ways that we actively or passively try to control what we can. And when we discover we can't — because the truth is you can't control anything — we get angry. We get angry at the small things and the people in our lives when we feel out of control.

I've learned I can't control the weather, someone I love dying, and I certainly can't control my children: oh my teenagers!

Some people say the only thing you can control is yourself, but even that is a lie. We try to control ourselves, but if we actually could we'd all be fitter, healthier people who made great decisions all the time. ...but that's not what happens.

My prayer lately has been **“I don't know.”** That's what I say to God for a million things that bug me that I want to control or fix and do something about and I just can't. I list all of the little and big worries and situations and I say “I don't know.” And I lay all of these things at the feet of Jesus.

I do that because while I can't control, while I don't know how to fix any of it, I worship a God who can and who does. I lay it all on the rock – the solid foundation—of Jesus.

I read this story on the internet recently. I can't tell you if it's true or not but it has truth in it. It's called the Black Telephone.

Those of us old enough to remember when the phone was wired to the wall, usually in the kitchen, can relate to this story. I loved this read.

When I was a young boy, my father had one of the first telephones in our neighbourhood. I remember the polished, old case fastened to the wall. The shiny receiver hung on the side of the box. I was too little to reach the telephone, but used to listen with fascination when my mother talked to it. Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person. Her name was "Information Please" and there was nothing she did not know. Information Please could supply anyone's number and the correct time.

My personal experience with the genie-in-a-bottle came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbour. Amusing myself at the tool bench in the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, but there seemed no point in crying because there was no one home to give sympathy. I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger, finally arriving at the stairway.

The telephone! Quickly, I ran for the footstool in the parlour and dragged it to the landing. Climbing up, I unhooked the receiver in the parlour and held it to my ear. "Information, please," I said into the mouthpiece just above my head.

A click or two and a small clear voice spoke into my ear. "Information." "I hurt my finger..." I wailed into the phone, the tears came readily enough now that I had an audience.

"Isn't your mother home?" came the question.

"Nobody's home but me," I blubbered.

"Are you bleeding?" the voice asked.

"No," I replied. "I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts."

"Can you open the icebox?" she asked.

I said I could.

"Then chip off a little bit of ice and hold it to your finger," said the voice.

After that, I called "Information Please" for everything. I asked her for help with my geography, and she told me where Philadelphia was. She helped me with my math.

She told me my pet chipmunk that I had caught in the park just the day before, would eat fruit and nuts.

Then, there was the time Petey, our pet canary, died. I called, "Information Please," and told her the sad story. She listened, and then said things grown-ups say to soothe a child. But I was not consoled. I asked her, "Why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers on the bottom of a cage?"

*She must have sensed my deep concern, for she said quietly,
"Wayne, always remember that there are other worlds to sing in."
Somehow I felt better.*

Another day I was on the telephone, "Information Please."

"Information," said in the now familiar voice.

"How do I spell fix?" I asked

All this took place in a small town in the Pacific Northwest. When I was nine years old, we moved across the country to Boston . I missed my friend very much.

"Information Please" belonged in that old wooden box back home and I somehow never thought of trying the shiny new phone that sat on the table in the hall. As I grew into my teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never really left me. Often, in moments of doubt and perplexity I would recall the serene sense of security I had then. I appreciated now how patient, understanding, and kind she was to have spent her time on a little boy.

A few years later, on my way west to college, my plane put down in Seattle. I had about a half-hour or so between planes. I spent 15 minutes or so on the phone with my sister, who lived there now. Then without thinking what I was doing, I dialed my hometown operator and said, "Information Please." Miraculously, I heard the small, clear voice I knew so well.

"Information."

I hadn't planned this, but I heard myself saying, "Could you please tell me how to spell fix?"

There was a long pause. Then came the soft spoken answer, "I guess your finger must have healed by now."

I laughed, "So it's really you," I said. "I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time?"

"I wonder," she said, "if you know how much your calls meant to me. I never had any children and I used to look forward to your calls."

I told her how often I had thought of her over the years and I asked if I could call her again when I came back to visit my sister.

"Please do," she said. "Just ask for Sally."

Three months later I was back in Seattle.

A different voice answered, "Information."

I asked for Sally.

"Are you a friend?" she said.

"Yes, a very old friend," I answered.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," She said. "Sally had been working part time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago."

Before I could hang up, she said, "Wait a minute, did you say your name was Wayne?"

"Yes." I answered.

Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down in case you called.

Let me read it to you. The note said, "Tell him there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean."

I thanked her and hung up. I knew what Sally meant.

Never underestimate the impression you may make on others.
Whose life have you touched today?

I can't control anything, but I can give all of these out of control things to God. And as I do, I am reminded that I can influence others. Influence is different from control. I share and shine a light and do things that might make a difference, but I'm not wedded to the outcome. That's influence. I leave the outcome up to God.

Psalm 40

I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry.

He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire;

he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.

He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.

Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him.

Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.

Many, LORD my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us. None can compare with you; were I to speak and tell of your deeds, they would be too many to declare.