

2018 Year End Sermon - A Stable Place

Colossians 3:12-17

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

Luke 2:41-52

Six and a half years ago, when I was still relatively new to Canada, and to this church, I was working with Christian Peacemaker Teams. If you don't know much about CPT, it is what we euphemistically call a 'lean' organization - like a lot of the church world, we get a lot of work done without spending much money. I learned that there was to be a Mennonite Church Eastern Canada gathering in Leamington, and as I was interested in spending more time with the Mennonites, and had never been to Leamington, I thought it would be a good idea to attend, to staff a table for CPT and especially to talk to people about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

I went about organizing this in typical CPT, 'lean' style. I somehow talked my way into getting registered, despite it being long past the deadline. Aldred and Erna agreed that I could travel there with them. I think I stayed on someone's couch, I can't quite remember - I know I have spent one night in Leamington sleeping in a car but I know it wasn't that night. And after the gathering, pastor Marilyn drove me home - or rather, she let me drive so that she had the option to nap or work on her sermon.

But we ended up talking most of the time, getting to know one another. This was really the first time I had spent at length with Marilyn, swapping life stories. I remember telling her about the church community I grew up in. My parents had started the congregation with a number of other folks, recognizing that the majority of institutional churches in their corner of England were not interested in doing anything new, and seemed to be content to cater to their own memberships and gradually dwindle.

I am sure I talked about many of the good things I experienced growing up in that congregation in the City of Ely; going early with my Dad to set up sound equipment, wriggling under the rows of chairs with my friends, lively Children's Church and Summer Club programs, collecting up the re-usable plastic cupholders after tea and coffee time, and a strong sense of a large extended family around me. I know that I talked about how, when I was a teenager, I didn't feel as much at home in the company of the other youth, and I used to skip the Sunday morning youth group meeting time, in order to sit in the Bible study class that my parents went to.

When I told that story to Marilyn she laughed, and said I was a precocious youth. Now where I come from that's an insult, but I don't think she meant it that way. And I was a precocious child, having developed interests and abilities at an earlier age than most. The school culture I encountered in England did not celebrate achievement, and most of the bullying and insults I remember came from a general disdain of thinking too much, reading too much. As a sidenote, it was the routine cruelty and homophobic hostility of my school, more than anything I heard at church, that told me how dangerous it was to be gay. Being gay, being smart, or being religious were all things that made a person a target. But then, there were always other targets. I know,

because sometimes I was the cruel one.

As I wrote this sermon, I thought of another time when I was very young, and I got separated from my Mum during a parade in the city of Ely. I was frightened, but then remembered that I could find the way home. I just had to look up at the tower of Ely Cathedral, and I could orient myself. And that helped me feel safe until my Mum found me again - probably only a few minutes later, but one of those endless moments that probably every child experiences.

It's a good metaphor for the way the church functioned for me, a refuge from the anti-intellectual secular culture, and an alternative where I was welcomed to explore my precocious interests. I could choose to explore them in Bible study with the adults, and it wouldn't make me a target. Do you have similar memories? A time when you were a child among adults, or perhaps inexperienced among experts, and you were made to feel welcome, treated as an equal? Find me after the service, and tell me a story.

Today's scripture readings bring together the only Bible story of Jesus as a child and part of Samuel's story. Both feature precocious children who feel at home in their religious institution, and we'll be considering them along with the Advent Theme 'A Stable Place'. It's not Advent any more, and last week Michele concluded the theme perfectly, but it fits too well here to drop it!

I think the childhood story of Jesus in the temple is pretty well known, but interpretations vary. My most memorable engagement with this story was at university with a Scottish friend. He'd learned bits and pieces about Christianity and the Bible in school and Sunday School as a child. At one point we got to talking about this story where Jesus slips away from his group, and his parents have to search Jerusalem for three days. When they find him he is in the Temple involved in intense discussions. My friend remembered the moral as: 'Jesus made his parents very worried, so it just goes to show that no-one's perfect'.

I suspect my eye started to twitch as I set about demolishing this heretical analysis. However, it does help focus our attention. Why is this the only Biblical story about the childhood of Jesus? What is it meant to communicate to us? Let's compare it with the story of Samuel.

Jesus and Samuel are both children in the temple at a time of great change. The sons of Samuel's mentor, the priest Eli, proving to be corrupt and abusive, and Samuel will be the last of the Judges, the series of temporary leaders appointed by God to deal with crisis. The People instead seek a new institution that can provide leadership and guidance and offer guarantees, and Samuel reluctantly anoints the first king. In the same way, I can imagine that some of the conversations happening between Jesus and the teachers were about how the Temple relates to the king, to the emperor, and to the people. Great changes were underway, and Jesus, like Samuel, would play a part in shaping them.

But neither text addresses that directly. They are simple, relatable stories. There's something lovely about Samuel's parents visiting him each year during their Passover festival trip. Hannah would bring him a new robe she had made, and I imagine him sleeping, wrapped up warm in

this garment, when he hears God's voice later in his story. I think the perpetual struggle to provide new clothing for growing boys is something lots of families cope with! And likewise, in the story of Jesus wandering off, I think lots of parents will recognise the gut-wrenching fear of losing track of a child in a crowded place.

We learn a bit about their families. Samuel's mother has five more children in the years after Samuel, and we get a sense of the large family group that Jesus and his parents are a part of, apparently close-knit and chaotic enough that it takes them a day's travel before everyone realizes that Jesus is missing. In contrast to these family sketches, we see both Samuel and Jesus at home in the Temple, Samuel very literally so, and Jesus in his explanation of it as his Father's house, the natural place for him to be found.

It's that sort of experience that we want for children in our church, is it not? We want them to feel safe here, at home, able to be themselves and grow in wisdom, and stature, and favour with God and with people, to borrow the phrase that describes both Jesus and Samuel maturing.

This isn't just an aspiration. We have put a lot of thought into how to make this place safer, more home-like, in our policies, in our furniture and architecture, and in our culture of work and worship. If you were here at the Christmas Eve service I hope you noticed Michele sharing specific information as part of her welcome, knowing that there are people in the building who are not familiar with this church, or any church.

The exhortation from Colossians that Haven shared with us helps us see the desire to create a warm, welcoming, safe community as part of our fundamental identity as followers of Jesus. It goes back a long way, even if it's easier to see it in the breach of Christian history than in the observance. It is obvious when fail to '*let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts*'. Our shared histories are full of times when passages like these have been used to compel silence, or compliance, or obedience. I think specifically of women in the church who have been directed to forgive in a spirit of Christian love, enduring various forms of oppression, hardship and violence for the sake of the smooth running of the church or the reputation and comfort of male ministers.

These aren't easy dynamics. On Friday night I found myself sitting in a church balcony with a man who was the target of racist harassment by another guest at the drop-in where I was volunteering. The first man wanted to call the police. He had had enough abuse. Fair enough. We very rarely ask people to leave, and we don't ban people or call the police, but that was what he was asking. I knew from my experience that we would eventually be able to persuade the abusive person to stop, or to leave, without calling the police. But then the person being harassed has to endure more. Did I have the right to ask him not to call the police, but to give us the time and the space to deal with things in a way that would be better for the deeply traumatized, intoxicated and frequently incarcerated person spouting ugly threats?

It was hard not to say "can you just put up with it? Can you just ignore the racism coming your way?" I had to actively resist the impulse to ask the man targeted by racism to suppress his need for safety. I had to listen to him and discern. I had to agree that this was not right, not fair,

and then I had to go and help my colleague gradually and nonviolently move the abusive person out of the space. I hope we did the right thing, but I also know that it may be me that needs forgiveness. And that's okay. It sounds simple. *'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.'* Easy, right?

Wrestling with the implications afterwards, I felt comforted when I saw Mary's truthfulness lead to a restored relationship with Jesus. Even though it seems the parents didn't fully understand their child (again, a relatable situation), Mary was able to tell Jesus exactly how his actions affected her. *'Why have you treated us like this? We have been searching with great anxiety'*. And after they speak, Jesus goes back to Nazareth with them, and is obedient. That sounds like pretty good relationship work to me. If Mary had decided that forgiveness meant squashing her own feelings, what a missed opportunity for Jesus's emotional and social development.

I want the church, in all its manifestations, to be a safe place. But I also know that it is a place of meeting, encounter, and transformation, and that means a place of conflict. It means that if we're doing it right, things will change. The children that are born into this congregation are not going to stay here. Some will, of course, but they will continue to grow, and bring new ideas and new issues into our midst. Others will leave. They will go out and join other congregations, or no congregations. They will be part of families we don't know yet, and they will create communities to meet needs we can't anticipate. And, if TUMC is doing its job right, all of these children will be able to reflect on blessings they received here when they're telling their life stories on long car journeys. And if TUMC is doing its job right, we'll be receiving other people, from other congregations, and from no congregations. And we'll be trying to offer them a stable place.

The children we have in our congregation right now - the babies in the nursery, the squirmy ones at children's time, the quiet ones who read books and the ones that are off doing sports on a Sunday, all the way up to the youth. They are not the future of TUMC, they are the present, the presence, of this church. I'm grateful our leaders help us to remember that, and continue to design this church to be a stable place, a launching pad, a place where we can all be a little bit precocious and know that we are exactly who we are meant to be.

To close, let me close by repeating part of the beautiful exhortation:

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.*

*And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to our Parent God through him.*

AMEN