

Paying Attention

Year C

Season of Pentecost

Sunday Between September 25 to October 1 Inclusive

September 26, 2010, Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Read the Bible passage: [Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15](#), The Message; or [Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Read the Bible passage: [Luke 16:19-31](#), The Message; or [Luke 16:19-31](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Faith-provoking, historical insights into the lesson by [David Ewart](#), [Luke 16:19-31](#).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this sermon.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Note: This sermon was preached September 30, 2007 at Edwards (Knox) United Church.

One of the most basic facts about reality is change. Every day we are defining and redefining ourselves. What the present and future will be, is being created by the values and ideas we hold. Each moment is a defining experience about what reality is, and what is good and needs to be held onto, and what ought to be thrown away because it stands in the way of the better. What counts is what we do with each day. We create, form and shape the world.

How we do that is one of the most pressing problems our society faces. We live in the world of competing values. There is a pluralism of ideas. At the moment our Canadian society is asking what is crucial for our society. What are the reasonable accommodations of others needed to create common values? What ought we give up for the common good? And from our perspective, what are the crucial values needed for the betterment of our society.

Who we are today is not who we were in the past. It may feel like we are. However, take a look at pictures of yourself from years ago - you'll see some changes there. Now we may respond, "Oh we still have the beliefs we had when we were young." Yet we know this is not true. We have a confidence or a trust in God and see traces of it from our past. But we know it has been tested and changed. Our childhood and naive faith has to be tested if it is going to sustain us in tough times. If it isn't, when we are faced with real earth shattering experiences, it will slide away.

What we build this day is not a finished product but a dream about what it could be. It is out of the stuff of life and faith that we create values that will situate us in the issues of our time.

George Hermanson

May the Lure be with you

Alex Colville once said to me,

The art you see on the wall is only a message that an artist has been at work. True art is the creative process not the finished product. If it has been a good process then the art you see invites you to a journey, a pilgrimage. In each seeing you will have different and new response. It is a living reality.

Value is in the work. As the poet writes, she is being the poet but once finished, the poem is now open to remaking. All art moves us into new awareness. Each playing, each telling, each viewing, each hearing is an opportunity to have new awareness.

To live in the present, in its temporality, its contingency and perishing takes courage. It takes vision to locate ourselves in reality. To pay attention is the work of deep spiritual awareness.

We carry within us our communal existence and personal history, and our cultural formation results from that interaction. We are faced with a choice these days - more vividness and difference or monochromatic and boring reality. Cultural distinctive can add vividness to the whole. Pluralism is a value which allows a particular culture experience to be important for its own sake, as well as for the sake of enjoyment at a higher level. The foundation of morality is the experience of value of persons and their environment. To achieve this demands attentiveness to what really matters for the common good, to be able to transcend our particularity and stop projecting there is only one way to experience beauty and community. It is to ask hard questions of one's perspective and to let go of those ideas that prevent us from experiencing well-being that is good for all. We are weaving the design of our common world. There is beauty in the knowledge there is no independent reality and we are bound together.

One of the issues for us is that we are not necessarily happy with the way the world is. There is within our gut, almost denied by inattention, questions of insecurity even as we rush out to keep the machine going. Some of us may experience a world created by ideas of violence. Others have had moments of despair. Others have faced health issues that could have crushed the spirit. Our living, then, has been a mixture of happiness and despair.

I heard a psychoanalyst say that religion is the vitamin needed to overcome the deficiencies in our living. The daily practice is to strengthen our attentiveness. We can ask hard questions about how we are living. Faith can be a mirror to our living. Everyone is afraid of mirrors. We hate the mirror. We don't want to look at ourselves. It is like the photos of us, we say this photo doesn't capture our likeness. The prophet says, this is how it is, and we don't want to hear it. However, we have to look at the mirror honestly, without fear.

Jesus parables are mirrors. They create chaos so we are open to new ways of visioning our reality. To let go of old ideas. They create open space so we can re-work reality. They make us ask new questions of what it means to be a religious community.

So here is another story in Luke. One reading is that it could be about the use of riches and the impact on the poor.

However, the deeper meaning is about paying attention.

Notice that Lazarus lived right outside the gate of the rich man's house. Every day the rich man had to step over him to get on with his business. Lazarus is outside the rich man's concern. Then the rich man dies and finally he notices Lazarus. A little too late. It would be tempting to make the story about punishment but it isn't. It is about indifference, not paying attention. Every day there was a missed opportunity. If there is punishment it is in the moment of not paying attention, for one's world is made smaller.

Then Luke adds. The rich man wants a warning to be sent back. The response is, "What God desires you to do was always right in front of you. They wrote it in the law and prophets." Pay attention.

Then the rich man says, "Send Lazarus back from the dead."

My paraphrase is - a resurrection would not wake us up. If we cannot see life in this world, if the issues in this world are not enough to get your attention, nothing will open your eyes. Don't go looking for a magical mystery tour to bring enlightenment for it won't work. All you get is some rush, a moment of self-absorbency, and not transformation.

We learn to pay attention by practicing it every moment. It is the walking prayer of eyes wide open to the world around us. In the practice of faith, practicing as a pilgrim not as a tourist, we engrave paying attention and it becomes our habit of the heart.

Our living is for the now and not for heaven. God in our living redeems the world, moment by moment, action by action. Jeremiah tells his people who are in despair to go out and plant a garden, buy a field. In other words, hope that is based in paying attention to the needs around us. Paying attention to those tasks that will create a future for all.

A story from Nova Scotia. I don't know if you read about two high school students who paid attention to the value of inclusion and fought back against bullying. A Grade 9 student arrived for the first day of school and was set upon by a group of six to 10 older students who mocked him, called him a homosexual for wearing pink and threatened to beat him up. The next day, grade 12 students David Shepherd and Travis Price decided something had to be done about bullying. "It's my last year. I've stood around too long and I wanted to do something," said David. They unleashed a sea of pink, for other students joined in and it is expanding beyond its beginnings.

When we pay attention to the hints in our world and faith we can discover the strength for the living of this day. Each of us will discover our own particular activity that will heal the world. Our mission as this church is to help us deepen our faith, help us to pay attention, to create disciples of hope who will go out to heal this bruised world of ours.

George Hermanson

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