

May 19, 2024 - Pentecost

Meditation: “Host or hostage?”

You all know by now that last September my daughter, Christina, got married. What you may not know is that she and her husband, Simon, got engaged in our dining room on her birthday, January 1. When we were talking about the upcoming wedding, I made a comment that I won't preside at a marriage service unless the couple takes some pre-marital instruction. It really doesn't matter to me if they take that instruction with me, or with someone else who specializes in that. What matters is that they demonstrate that they are concerned not just about the event, the wedding itself, but about the marriage, the rest of their lives.

Barbara and I took a pre-marital course, and oh the stories we could tell about one of the couples, who definitely should not have been getting married.

Christina and Simon decided that they should take a pre-marital course before they got married. And they received the advice that we, Barbara and I, received, and the piece of advice that I give to all the couples I meet with prior to their weddings, namely, from here on out it's not all about you (singular), about what's best for you (singular). It's about something bigger than you (singular), it's about you (as a couple), about what's best for both of you.

And now, Christina and Simon are expecting the birth of their firstborn, a son, whom they have already named Samson. I hope there are no Delilah's in his life. Christina and Simon are about to discover that life isn't all about them (as a couple), but about something bigger. Life is about to be about what's best for them as a family. Decisions are going to start to revolve around Samson's needs and interests.

The prophet Ezekiel, which, by the way means 'God is strong', lived and prophesied during the Jewish-Babylonian war and into the first decade or more of the Babylonian exile. He prophesied about the fall and destruction of the city of Jerusalem. He also prophesied about the restoration of the Jewish people to the land of Israel. Today's reading was that prophecy. The valley of the dry bones is the people of Israel, who had died, at least metaphorically. They, or at least the elite of them, had been taken to

Babylon, away from the land that God had promised their ancestor Abraham; away from the temple in Jerusalem, the center of their religious life; away from their God. They were as good as dead. And yet, Ezekiel tells them that they will be restored to the land and to the ruins of Jerusalem. Ezekiel tells the people that God will work wonders on their behalf. Ezekiel tells the people that their story as a people does not revolve around them as a nation, but that it revolves around something bigger, something much bigger. Ezekiel tells them that their story as a people revolves around God and God's promises to them.

After the crucifixion, the disciples were in disarray. One of them had hanged himself, and the others feared for their lives. Surely the Romans would crucify them next as they were students of Jesus. They scattered, and when they did meet, it was in a locked room. Eventually they went back to what they knew, fishing. But the risen Christ would not permit that to be the end of the story. If it had been the end of the story, we would not be here right now. Last week we read about how a successor was chosen for Judas. And, had we read the lesson from the book of Acts this morning, we would have read about how the Holy Spirit descended upon them, like tongues of flame. And they were told that their story wasn't about them as a group of twelve, but about something much bigger. Their story was about God, who wanted them to spread, to the ends of the earth, the news about God's kingdom. And now their story is our story.

In the time that followed the Second World War, there was a boom, or perhaps I should say there were booms. There was a baby boom. There was an economic boom. There was a technological boom. And, there was a boom in the church. Our denomination was building new churches as fast as it could, and those churches were filled with people and children. Perhaps not at first, but at least eventually there was a growing sense, perhaps it was subconscious, that the church was there to serve us, the congregation. I believe that it was this understanding, or maybe I would better call it a misunderstanding, that led to where we are right now. And it's not just the United Church of Canada, but all of the so-called mainline churches – the Presbyterians, the Anglicans, the Methodists, and others. We thought and behaved, and perhaps even believed that the church was about us, but it

isn't. It's about something much bigger. The church is really about God's mission to humankind. And the church isn't even really ours. It's God's. God started it all with the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. God started it with the intent of fulfilling God's mission to humankind.

We humans are funny and often self-centered creatures. We tend to think that life revolves around us, around our needs. It doesn't matter if we are two people who are about to get married, a married couple about to have children, a nation, a group of disciples, or a congregation. We all think that life, or the story of our being, or the story of our world revolves around us. But it doesn't. It's about something much bigger. It's about God, about God's story of creation and relationship and grace and reconciliation and, and, and God's grace is unearned, undeserved, even unasked for.

And now for the really funny part. Even though the church, the disciples, the nation of Israel, new parents, or newly married couples are about something much bigger than themselves as individuals, they all require us to play our part. In order for the dry bones to come together and have sinews and flesh and skin come upon them and to have the breath of life enter them again, Ezekiel had to prophesy. No marriage works without both people working together to make it successful. No family works without all involved working together to make it successful for all. No nation, or group of disciples, or congregation is successful without the participation of everyone – each in their own way.

Wayne Dyer said, "every moment of your life you have a choice to be a host to God or a hostage to your ego." In other words, every moment we have a choice to make, we can believe that the world, the relationship, the church, revolves around us, or we can set aside our ego and accept God into our hearts and lives, and allow God to work through us.

When we forget this, when we think and act as though it's all about us, we end up like a valley full of dry dead bones, because we shut off the Spirit of life. When we remember, when we allow the Spirit of life to work through us, we come to life again. In everything we do, in every decision we make, we need to ask, 'is this about us, or about God?' 'Do we want to be a host to God, or a hostage to our ego?' The decision is yours.