

## **New Beginnings – August 26, 2007**

Good morning one and all. It is a delight to be here with you. At the same time, it is also daunting as I look forward to the next five months in ministry in this parish. I am eager to meet everyone and I look with anticipation to my time with you as we grow in our faith together.

Like so many others, I am at that time in life when one is able to reflect on the past and see the path which I have traveled. The remarkable thing is that it was not the path I would have drawn for myself in my 20s and 30s. Life has a way of moving one along in directions and opportunities we may not have foreseen.

As with so many of you I suspect, I grew up on a farm in a rural community. Mine happened to be in the Red River Valley of Manitoba, one of the bread baskets of the world. Grain grew in abundance in spite of the clay soil in what was once a lake bottom.

My family church was located on an acre of land given for this purpose by my great grandfather. While in 1950 the church was moved into the town, the graveyard is still there housing my parents and most of my early relatives. To stand in that graveyard is to feel surrounded by the spirits of Christians who worked hard to make the new land come forth with bounty. The graveyards of the County make me feel the same way – the silent testimony to lives lived in the service and love of God and in the hope of better tomorrows.

The example of my family and other church members caused me to consider the Ministry as a career. Our church never had ordained clergy – we were a student charge with a new minister every 1-2 years. In spite of all that change in leadership, the congregation remained faithful to their calling to be God's witnesses in that place. This parish was a testimony to the importance of ministry of all people. My youthful experience of church was constant change in leadership and an example of a people open to new ways of doing things all the time. As a result, I have always eagerly looked forward to where God is taking the church next. With God in our midst, walking beside us, why should we be afraid?

Ordained in 1966 by Manitoba Conference, at the age of 23, I moved off to Vancouver to establish the first church for the deaf there. I did not know any sign language but I quickly learned. We all know that necessity galvanizes action and attention. This ministry was working on behalf of the Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian and United Churches. As I attended the meetings of each of these denominations, I quickly realized the things we hold in common far out way the things wherein we differ as denominations. No one way is either perfect or infallible.

Years later, after a five year ministry at a regular parish in Richmond, BC I entered the world of major charities usually as Executive Director. I became a member of a congregation rather than a clergy leader and participated in presbytery, conference and national committees.

Most importantly, I was able to preach many weekends around BC and experience the richness of congregational diversity.

In 1985 I moved to Toronto as Executive Director of the Ontario Division of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind. Also at this time I began overseas work in leadership development funded by the Canadian International Development Agency known as CIDA . When you work occasionally abroad, you are struck by how much again all people have in common apart from ways we do things or perhaps the way or what we eat. From my years working in North Africa, Asia, the Indian subcontinent and South America I also saw the importance of the social justice, education and food aid programs of the church in partnership with sister churches abroad.

After taking early retirement, I worked on my own as a consultant assisting as CEO or CFO again in the not for profit sector. For 2003-2005 I was invited to be head of stewardship and the M&S Fund for the United Church of Canada. Preaching across this land and witnessing the great commitment of United Church people in churches large and small, I became convinced as never before that God was at work in our church. Great changes may indeed come to our church but God is there with us as we work through means to remain relevant in a changing world.

Interim ministries at Bridge Street United in Belleville, Wellington United in Wellington Ontario and now here in Prince Edward North give me further rich opportunities to share my faith but also to meet great people and receive blessings and strength from them as we grow in faith together.

You will note that my preaching Sunday by Sunday will be based on biblical texts as outlined in the church's lectionary. I know you are very used to biblical preaching and know the rich materials there are therein for daily living the faith.

I have titled today's reflection "New Beginnings" as this is a new beginning for me and even more importantly a new beginning for this parish after Bruce's sixteen year ministry in your midst. Though we know the work of the church is greater than any one person, we naturally grieve with the loss of a much loved pastor and friend.

My role as interim minister is to assist you to move on, to plan for a new future as the people of God in these communities and to be ready to welcome a new pastor when found.

Our first lesson read today was from the Book of Jeremiah; this is his account of his call by God to a ministry as a prophet of God. To say he was less than pleased with this call is an understatement. Jeremiah was a realist – he knew it would be tough. No one would honour him for it. In fact, life was likely to be lonely as he proclaimed a message no one wanted to hear let alone heed.

He starts off with a twofold protest: I am too young and I do not know how to speak in public. God dismisses both of these arguments. Go, I will give you the words. People will listen to what you say in spite of your youth.

Remember that the passage opens with God proclaiming to Jeremiah that God has known him from his time in the womb and chose him for this work even then. God is saying that he has thought this through and has carefully chosen Jeremiah. God has no second thoughts – Jeremiah **is** his man for this tough and at times nasty role.

God says: “Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.”

God is always more sure of our capacities for ministry and life than we are ourselves. No second thoughts here. I know what I am doing God proclaims – now, are you prepared to go for me?

It was a new beginning for Jeremiah leading to a life of service, a hard life often lonely and in fear. Go, I am with you says our God. God daily says this to each of us as we daily embark on our Christian journey.

Times of change threaten people, all of us for some reason. Even when we are not happy or satisfied with where we are, it takes courage to step out and bring change about. Jeremiah took up the challenge and held on to God’s word that God was with him always.

Jeremiah’s life was often bleak but he never wavered in his determination to follow God regardless of the cost.

In the short Psalm #71 reading, the theme continues of God with us as we step out into life. The psalmist is feeling very vulnerable, things are getting dicey and he just wants to withdraw into God as a refuge. He is wounded by the words and actions of people around him as he tries to be faithful to God. He is raw and hurting and needs reassurance that he is on the right path. “Rescue me” he shouts, from all these wicked, mean, hurtful people for I am sinking.

Then, almost to reassure himself, he reiterates what he believes. He says: “For You, O Lord, are my hope, my trust” and you have been so since I was very young. You took me from my mother’s womb and I have leaned on you O God for strength ever since. Therefore, my praise is continually of you.

It is interesting that both Jeremiah and the psalmist have felt the hand of God since their earliest days. They would have known the creation story as written in the book of Genesis. Basic to this story is the fundamental belief that it was God who deliberately created order out of chaos; as he rested each day, he was pleased and saw that all was good. God’s last creation, men and women, was also deliberate. God breathed into their nostrils the breath of life, his spirit, and again, he saw that all was good.

The Hebrews believed, though they also often forgot, this critical basis of their faith. God was Creator of all and as such, was never far from his creation. Jeremiah and the psalmist endured all they endured because they believed God was always beside them and held them as creatures of great and worthwhile value.

Our Gospel reading from Luke continues this theme of God's love and new beginnings. Jesus, as was his habit, was teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. He noticed on the periphery of the crowd a woman who was bent over and had been so for some eighteen years. He called to her to come forward. Note what happened next. He did not drill her about her life nor did he blame her for her problems which people in his day usually did as they believed a person was being punished for some reason.

Instead, he said these wonderful words; "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity" He then laid his hands on her and she straightened up. She shouted with joy but all around Jesus the religious leaders muttered their disapproval. No rejoicing that a person was freed of her infirmity. Rather, they were angry that Jesus dared to heal on the Sabbath day! Jesus was astounded! How hypocritical you are he said. Can you not be pleased that this woman was freed from her problems and is restored to life? Get your priorities straight. God has more concern for the welfare of one of his creations than he does about strict laws which separate people.

Note the words of Jesus are "set free" not "cured". Set free conjures up images of freedom from bondage, from slavery, from even the extreme constraints of the Sabbath day requirements!

We are left with the imprint of the story that causes us to wonder. What makes us unable to stand up straight to tell the truth, to rise from low-esteem, to look beyond the bottom line of money? What causes us to be bent over, to have our head down, to only see one direction at a time? How do we respond when we hear the good news that we are set free from whatever holds us in bondage? When we are bound – tied up, bent over-there is not much room for perspective and expressing joy can be painful! So when Jesus calls out, "You are set free," what is our response?

The Christian life is a challenging and exciting journey. Each day is a new beginning, each moment an opportunity for new learning and new sensing of God's presence. I so look forward to the next five months as together we share our faith with one another and continue to know what it means to be set free for life and service.

Thanks be to God.

Gary Magarrell