

Sermon Archive 173

Tuesday 31 October 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Isaiah 60: 1-7
 Ephesians 4: 1-16
 John 15: 1-5

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I once came upon a family that had split for the silliest of reasons. One person had said something quite innocent, not intended to cause offence. I don't know whether the thing said was said clumsily, or was heard wrong, but it ended out causing hurt and offence. Things escalated, went out of control, and suddenly there was a split in the family. It was all over nothing, and the split was sad.

I once came upon a family that had split. It came from no momentous event that could be pin-pointed in time. It was a slow drifting apart of lives that had become too busy with other things. Or maybe it was the developing of personalities in different directions. Who knows, maybe they'd never been compatible or committed to each other in the first place. In the shifting of characters, the repositioning of goals and lives, who's really to know. But yes, the split was sad.

I once came upon a family that had split. And to be honest, everyone was utterly relieved about it. The relationship had been violent and cruel. He was never going to accept the help he needed in order to change, and her bruises were ugly testaments to how it all needed to end. When she finally set herself free, it was what you might call a Magnificat of the soul. Liberated.

Saved. Free to start again and build a real life. Nevertheless, the situation had been sad – and it was sad that it hadn't worked. In this case, there was just so much to be sad about.

Whenever splits occur, regardless of the reasons or the results, sadness is part of the picture.

From the beginning of our planning this service, we acknowledged that it needed to be called not a “celebration”, but a “commemoration”, because part of the story of the reformation is the split. Our family split during the reformation, and that is one of the realities.

Other realities are that some good has come from it – and some of the good has been articulated by the different denominations during the “Act of Thanksgiving”. Further, that we have come together, to remember together, to worship together, to make an act of commitment together, is also good. It shows that our history hasn't had the power completely to break the family.

The reformation was not a single event; it was a long process. Some consider the process still to be happening. Constant re-forming of who we are and how we operate. Certainly we all affirm that while we profess the activity of the Holy Spirit, we're affirming growth, change, movement – something less like a statue, and more like a vine. What we're commemorating today (we living, growing, changing people), in this 500th year, is the famous event considered by many to be the tipping point, when the rest of the re-forming process became inevitable. The German monk, Martin Luther, had become increasingly concerned about the church selling indulgences. The church was receiving money (perhaps encouraging the paying of money) in exchange for prayers. Luther formed the view that this was a pastoral, ethical, theological failure on the part of the church. In

a flourish of Germanic thoroughness, he came up with 95 objections. And in keeping with the public profile techniques of the time, he nailed them to the door of the local cathedral. The 95 theses were quite narrow in their focus, but the debate they caused gradually expanded into many matters. Interpretation of scripture, scripture's relationship with tradition, individual theological responsibility, the ethics of prayer, the role of priesthood and the nature of diverse forms of ministry, the priesthood of all believers, the authority of Rome. The debate spread geographically, with conversations of varying quality and courtesy occurring all over Europe. By the time that Martin Luther had been excommunicated, huge numbers of people already had made up their minds to go with him. What he said made sense to them. They took on the famous (but probably apocryphal) catch cry attributed to Luther: "Here I stand. I can do no other". The Catholic / Protestant split had happened. As with any split, there are differing views on whether it *needed* to happen. There are differing perspectives on the harvest it brought forth. But here we are locally, worshipping God together, and making commitments for our sharing of the future. Perhaps we face the future as people made wiser by an experience. Perhaps we face the future as people who have discovered treasures we might not otherwise have noticed. Perhaps we face the future as people of a Christ who carries scars and is all the more real and compassionate because of them. Perhaps.

We certainly face the future as people who have heard three scripture passages – so have received three little visions. From Isaiah, a vision of the nations being swept together into the light – of sons coming from far away, of daughters being carried on their nurses' arms, exiled people coming home in one great act

of praise. From Paul's letter to the Ephesians, one unified people, being called to live with humility and gentleness in the bond of peace – one Lord, one faith, one God of all – knitting every ligament and part into one body of love. And from John's gospel, Jesus playing with the image of the vine – many branches, each one different, but connected, growing, and pumping with the sap of God's own life. "Abide in me", he says, "as I abide in you."

I wonder whether, as we have felt called to come together for this occasion, God isn't now calling us to let ourselves be inspired by these visions of unity and shared life. I wonder whether God isn't calling us into a new period of re-forming, where the new form will be more like Isaiah's coming home, more like Paul's one body, more like Jesus' many branched vine. How would it be if **that** was our new God-given form? A new re-formation under the creative hand of God.

Before we profess our faith together, we keep a moment of quiet reflection.