

# **Sermon for Sunday October 25, 2009**

## **St. Paul's 157<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

### **Where your gladness and the world's hunger meet**

*Hebrews 7:23-28*

Mark 10:46-52

### ***Rev. Elaine Longland***

Well Happy Anniversary! One hundred and fifty-seven years! Wow! Isn't it amazing how the years go rolling by? I feel it is such an honour to be invited to celebrate with you today. Thank you for inviting me. It was just 20 years ago that I was beginning to get to know you folks. Now many of the folks I got to know are no longer with us and I see many new faces who are wondering who I am. The years go rolling on and things change.

Anniversaries are a time of reflection. I am doubly aware of that today, because Herb and I are also celebrating our 51st wedding anniversary today. (He isn't with me today as he is counting collection at our church in Alliston.) However, in shopping for a card for him, I have learned that the messages reflect on the past and look to the future. And so at dinner tonight, we will remember the times of joy. We will think about the ways we grew as individuals and in our relationship as we waded through the tough times. We will also talk about what we have learned to take us into the future.

So today we all pause for a time of assessment and reflection. This is more critical for you than for us because we probably don't have a whole lot of years left. Your future, however, stretches out beyond the horizon. And so we ask what are your strengths as a congregation? What have you learned in the last 159 years that will help to keep your ministries relevant in a rapidly changing world? What are the ministries to which St. Paul's is called in 2009 and beyond?

The concept of 'call' is pretty basic to our lives as Christians and our being as a congregation. Given the gifts and talents with which we have been blessed, what is God calling us to do? This is a question that we need to return to time and again as our life circumstances and the world around us changes.

Some thoughts by Frederick Bueckner, a favourite Christian author of mine, may help us get our heads and hearts around this question. Bueckner maintains that there are 2 things to keep in mind when we seek to determine our calling in life.

A: what is it that we need most to do and

B: what is it that the world needs most to have done.

He says that if you get a kick out of your work, you have probably met requirement A. But if your work is writing TV ads for deodorant you have probably missed requirement B. On the other hand, if you work as a doctor in a leper colony, but most of the time are bored and depressed by it, you have probably met requirement B, but are bypassing requirement A. Bueckner sums up his analysis by saying that the work to which God calls you is where your gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

That reminds me of Bartimaeus in our gospel lesson this morning. Blind Bartimaeus is sitting by the roadside as Jesus and a large, noisy crowd come by. When Bartimaeus realizes what all the excitement is about, he begins to call out to Jesus. The crowd tries to silence him, but then Jesus learns of the blind man's presence and calls to him. "Take heart, get up, he is calling you," the crowd tells the man. With that Bartimaeus throws off his cloak and springs to his feet. I love this image. Just think what that cloak means to that man. He was a beggar. That cloak was probably the only garment he had to protect himself from the cold. It would cushion the hard ground for sleeping. But when he hears that Jesus is calling him, he throws it off with reckless abandon and leaps to his feet. The passage ends by saying that Bartimaeus went with Jesus on the way. He was called.

So often, our response is more tempered. We are so careful about 'springing' and so cautious about going 'all out'. We like to look before we leap and then frequently, after a look, we do not leap at all. Bartimaeus threw off his cloak, so caught up was he in a great hope and a great trust. So too, we are called to cast aside our caution which is a result of our desire to protect our own narrow interests so that we can become free to experience the pulse and the joy of headlong discipleship. Then we discover where our gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

Your Vision Task Force has been hard at work for the past few months reflecting on that very question. Where do the strengths of St. Paul's and the needs of this community come together? This morning you have witnessed the fruit of their labour and I, for one, am most impressed.

They have identified three pillars of strength in this congregation. First, that you are a welcoming congregation. Certainly from my time of ministering with you, I heartily agree that welcoming is something you do very well. Second, that you are a transforming congregation. Lives are changed here as you offer varied worship experiences and learning opportunities. Third, that you are a serving congregation. Having been nurtured and inspired, you then go out into this community and the world to make a difference. Isn't that idea in itself empowering? That the world can be a better place because of St. Paul's United Church in Milton.

And your Task Force has made it very clear that the foundation for their work and their vision for this congregation are based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. That's where it all begins for all of us. But how easy it is to lose sight

of that as we get caught up in paying the bills, searching out volunteers to serve on Council, preparing church school lessons and polishing an anthem. From time to time we need to step back and remember our basic purpose: to follow the teachings of Jesus.

The story is told of some travelers in the desert who found a bubbling spring. They were so grateful they each laid a stone beside it. Year after year, other weary travelers found the same spring and laid their stones around and over the spring.

Eventually a great cathedral had been built over the spot. People came and worshiped in the cathedral but as centuries went by they forgot about the spring and remembered only the cathedral.

But one day some thirsty, tired pilgrims happened to come by. They had heard the legend that there was water there and at first they searched in vain for it. Then one man put his ear to the floor because he thought he heard the sound of gurgling water. Eagerly he pried up the ancient stones and found the spring again.

So to what ministries is God calling us as individuals and St. Paul's as a congregation that will make the world a better place? Where is it that your gladness and the world's deep hunger come together? Your Vision Task Force has proposed some answers to that question. I hope you will get excited about the possibilities and, like Bartimaeus, leap into action.

But I also hope that every once and a while, you will put an ear to the floor and remember the foundation for all our ministries: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind and with all your strength and love your neighbour as yourself.

With your ministry based on that foundation, you are assured of many more anniversaries. Thanks be to God. Amen.