

Knox Presbyterian Church, Victoria. April 13, 2008

By Ian Gartshore

Prayer of Approach and Confession

Great God, we have indeed come to sing your praises. You deserve them!

Without you we would not exist, we would not live and breathe, we would not know love, joy, peace, friendship nor any of the other things that make our lives meaningful. So here we are, in this, your house of worship.

We realise that we have some failings. Yes, we have acted in ways that are not worthy of your love: we may have been overly stern with someone, or looked down on someone else. We may have ignored someone who really needed a moment of our time. We might have let fear crowd out our love for a spouse, the same fear that gets in the way of welcoming a stranger to our church. There are other things we have said or done that get in the way of our relationship with you, each other, and even with ourselves. Lord, please accept our apologies.

We also know that you have no interest in us hanging on to our sense of guilt. You desire us to be free people, not slaves to our mistakes, sins and shortcomings. So help us, right now, to accept your forgiveness. Help us to forgive ourselves. Free us from our past so that we might learn from it and

grow stronger. Accept us into your loving arms.

What are people looking for in a Church?

For the last decade or more my principal ministry has been as a marriage and family therapist. As a former congregational minister I am often distressed by the kinds of comments I receive from my clients, many of whom struggle with their relationship with the church. I have heard them talk about what they wish their church could be for them. Some in the AA movement talk about wanting a church in which they can share their struggles as easily as they do with their weekly meetings. Others yearn for a church that focuses more on celebration than it does on sin. Some want a church that is alive, but without being fundamentalist and narrow. The list goes on.

Of course I also hear the wishes of clients for a family that is supportive yet not controlling, respectful yet curious, fun yet meaningful. There is always improvement possible in any family, and in any church.

There are no perfect families, of course. Even though we all have likely had some struggles with various family members at times, all of us have a desire to belong to it, no?

I once attended a Presbytery workshop at which the facilitator asked this

question: what is the number one reason people go to church? There were lots of guesses. (None of the congregational ministers got the right one, by the way!) His answer? The number one reason people go to church is because they have or desire to have a sense of belonging.

Belonging happens in a number of contexts. Belong to a close relationship, belong to a group of friends, belong to a club, belong to a church.

Especially in a world of artificial computer and technologically-driven communications, a world in which **things** are more important than are **relationships**, that **doing** is more important than **being**, one in which isolation and loneliness are at pandemic levels, **all** of us want to have a sense of connection that is real and meaningful.

In Genesis 1, after creating the heavens and the earth, God also wanted to have some company. We are the result of this wish. / God spoke, and we came to be.

This desire to belong is very striking in the very beautiful story of Ruth and Naomi, found in the Hebrew or Old Testament section of the Bible. When it was read to us you may not have been aware of some of the background.

First, a note about their culture.

Women were considered to be of very little value unless they had a father

or a husband. Without a man in their lives women had no real grounding point, and so their sense of belonging was poor. Thankfully this is not so today in Canada.

So here's the scene for this little book of the Hebrew Scriptures: A Jewish couple named Naomi and Elimelech have two sons, and they move to Moab for economic opportunities. Their sons eventually marry local Moabite gals. So far, so good. But not for long.

All of those men died. The three women were widows. Here three heart-broken women, without much in the way of identity, try to sort out what to do. They have lost their husbands. They don't know what to do. So Naomi decides to go back to her own country so that she can be with her extended family. One daughter-in-law is convinced to go back to the family of her deceased husband, but the other makes a commitment to her mother-in-law that blows pretty well any marriage vow out of the water. "Where you go I will go. Your people will be my people, and your god my god." There is a bond between these two women that is, quite simply, amazing. Not bad when you consider all the stories you've heard about mother and daughters-in-laws!

I would encourage you to read the rest of the story in your own leisure. I

can give you a sneak preview: their lives improve considerably, and new love is found.

So what has this story got to do with what people are looking for in families and in their church? Plenty.

Let me begin by telling you what I have heard from many clients: “I want a church where relationships are strong, meaningful, & authentic. / Faith that is real, that is practised. / Good music. / Good speakers/preachers. / A good place to bring children. / A place in which I feel at home.”

After doing some sifting through these, and setting aside the personal preferences such as music, I have come up with three simple areas that, if practised, will reveal a dynamic, alive, church. One that draws people.

Now, you might want to know that I was trained in classical preaching.

That means having three points. Are you ready? To help you (and me) remember, the first letter to each point conveniently spells A-I-R. Air to breathe! A breath of fresh air! You can find a summary of this in your bulletin. Let’s take a look at this together, shall we?

AIR

Authenticity: being genuine (not fake), being congruent (what I say is what I

do), being open to people, not trying to change them to fit our ideas

Integrity: having beliefs and acting on them

Respect: for others, for the sacred space that is worship, for oneself as a temple of the living God, and for the community that represents the body of Christ.

I would invite you to look these words over in the next week. There is a lot to consider.

If you are like me, you'll likely find these thoughts pretty heady, and challenging. I do not believe, however, that living in this way need to be complicated. When we feel safe, loved, cherished and the like then it is much easier to live with authenticity, integrity and respect. Here is a beautiful story from Africa to illustrate this point.

THEY'RE SINGING YOUR SONG

When a woman in a certain African tribe knows she is pregnant, she goes out into the wilderness with a few friends and together they pray and meditate until they hear the song of the child. They recognize that every soul has its own vibration that expresses its unique flavor and purpose.

When the women attune to the song, they sing it out loud.

Then they return to the tribe and teach it to everyone else.

When the child is born, the community gathers and sings the child's song to him or her. Later, when the child enters education, the village gathers and chants the child's song. When the child passes through the initiation to adulthood, the people again come together and sing. At the time of marriage, the person hears his or her song.

Finally, when the soul is about to pass from this world, the family and friends gather at the person's bed, just as they did at their birth, and they sing the person to the next life.

In the African tribe there is one other occasion upon which the villagers sing to the child. If at any time during his or her life, the person commits a crime or aberrant social act, the individual is called to the center of the village and the people in the community form a circle around them. Then they sing their song to them.

The tribe recognizes that the correction for antisocial behavior is not punishment; it is love and the remembrance of identity. When you recognize your own song, you have no desire or need to do anything that would hurt another.

A friend is someone who knows your song and sings it to you when you have forgotten it. Those who love you are not fooled by mistakes you

have made or dark images you hold about yourself. They remember your beauty when you feel ugly; your wholeness when you are broken; your innocence when you feel guilty; and your purpose when you are confused.

You may not have grown up in an African tribe that sings your song to you at crucial life transitions, but life is always reminding you when you are in tune with yourself and when you are not. When you feel good, what you are doing matches your song, and when you feel awful, it doesn't. In the end, we shall all recognize our song and sing it well. You may feel a little warbly at the moment, but so have all the great singers. Just keep singing and you'll find your way home.

Isn't that a wonderful story?

It probably means quite a few different things to each of us. Consider with me, for a moment, what this story and the story of Ruth and Naomi, mean to Knox.

These stories powerfully speak to our need to belong, to be known, to be loved, to have a place in the church, community, circle of friends, or whatever. To be loved isn't so much a feeling as an action, a knowing that I am accepted, warts and all. A place where judgement is not necessary

because there is very little fear. A circle where all of our gifts are valued. A place safe enough to mess up and admit it. A family where we can all grow into the beings God intended us to be.

Of course in such a place there needs to be a commitment to the greater good of all, a commitment to education, worship, building relationships, and getting one's hands dirty. It means hanging in there when the going is rough, just as Ruth did with her mother-in-law.

Just as with a committed marital relationship, when people hang in there and access the resources they need, admit their fears to one another (in a safe context), then there is growth, excitement, and, a whole lot more! Just as with families, where there is a mixture of joy and tension, ups and downs, real churches experience real problems. But the kind of church that many are looking for is a church where people are willing to admit their fears and limitations, laugh together and cry together, and carry on being a reflection of Christ's face, here on earth.

I invite you to take a look at your hands now. See their texture, the lines, the fingers. These are your hands. They belong to you as an individual. They are also capable of holding back in fear, clenching in anger and also reaching out in love. What do your hands prefer? What does your soul prefer?

It is not possible to both open and close one's hands at the same time.

When you are with others you can use your hands to create a barrier or you can open your hands and arms to receive them.

What kind of church is Knox? How open are you to one another, and to new-comers? If you find yourself connecting only with those you know and do not easily engage others, consider what is getting in your way. What are your hands and arms telling the world?

It must have been terrifying for Ruth to go to a strange country and altogether new people, to leave her family and community behind. And yet her love for her mother-in-law was stronger than was her fear. If our love for God is stronger than is our fear then we will have open hands, open arms, open hearts.

The kind of church most people want is a church in which the people are open. Authentic people, those who live with Integrity, those who Respect themselves and each other. A-I-R. Air to breathe, fresh air. Our world is looking for fresh air. May God bless your church, and help you to love those who come here searching for a place to belong, whether they be the Ruth and Naomi's of the world, or those who are trying to figure out what their own unique song might be.

Steve Sturgess has graciously agreed to sing a song he wrote about Ruth.

Pastoral prayer

Gracious God, we are thankful. You have called us to be your people, asked us to be agents of your love in the world. You have made us your family and have helped us to have a sense of belonging. You have honoured and blessed us in big ways.

We are aware, though, that many feel lonely, cut-off, distressed, fearful, unloved. Too many feel isolated or unfulfilled because they have never felt secure enough to open themselves to others. Maybe they have been mistreated as children. Maybe they risked and then felt rejected. Some have so much sorrow that they prefer to wall themselves off. Fear stops too many from opening their hands and their arms to real relationships with others, and with you.

God of the universe, help us to reach out to these. / Take away our fears of inadequacy, of being “hurt”, of being rejected. Use our arms, hands, mouths, eyes, and our beings so that you might become more real to those who are hurting.

We pray for our minister, Laura Kavanagh. You know how hard she works, and how easy it is for us to let her do things that we could likely do. Encourage us to be more the various parts of your body, the Church.

Lord’s prayer: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day thy daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Benediction: we are individuals. And we are connected one to another. As

another church creed begins, "We are not alone. We live in God's world."
This is true. Thanks be to God who has given us this wonderful gift of
relationship, of belonging. Go, now, and help the world to experience what
it is to belong to God.