

It was wonderful to have my mom visit from Calgary last week. She had not spent a lot of time in the Vancouver area since we moved away in 1969. I took her to what are becoming my favourite places – crossing over Lions Gate Bridge, Stanley Park Sea Wall, Granville Island and the little ferries that get you there. We ended our time together with a marvellous dinner at the Beach House on Dunderave Wharf. It was a great visit in a beautiful place.

It was equally wonderful that she received such a warm welcome from the people I've chosen to connect with here in North Vancouver. Many times at coffee last week, I got entangled in my own conversation, but when I looked up, I could see my mom happily ensconced in her own conversations with many of you. I want to thank you for your kindness. Mom said to me later how good it was to place me here, to see me in my work, my apartment, my neighbourhood. I guess as a mom, she's still worried about her little boy and what he's up to.

Parents are often worried about their children...regardless of their age. No sooner did I drop my mom off at the airport on Monday, when I drove down to the Tsawassen Ferry to go over to the Island to see our son Jordan in his work at the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve. Whether we're taking them for their first injections, walking them to the first grade, cheering for them at first soccer games, weeping at their graduation from high school then university, or supporting their first moves into new careers, parents are always parents...no matter how old our kids get. And when our kids make choices we would not make, which take them into the darkest of human experiences, we worry even more. We say we let go, because they have to find themselves, but we never really let go. The role of protector seems to be imbedded in our DNA, when we become parents. Our first tribe is our family, and whether it's been a positive experience or a negative experience our family of origin is the greatest influence of our lives.

According to the scriptures, this is a two edge sword. It's hard to imagine that Jesus actually said the words we heard Marion read for us this morning. A good Jewish boy, raised in a Jewish family; it's hard for us to imagine that Jesus would advocate the apparent dissolution of family for the sake of faith. I wonder if we wouldn't rather dismiss this story as a fabrication of the gospel writer's imagination than to actually take Jesus seriously when he says "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." What is Jesus doing? What is he up to? In this text he sounds more like some loose cannon fanatic going off in all directions, than a disciplined rabbi; a teacher of the law.

Rather than write him off, however, I think we would do well to think about what this text says to us about what we ourselves must give up to pursue a life of faith, right here in Lynn Valley, at Lynn Valley United Church, right now, today, this week, in the coming weeks, and months. And for this morning, I feel compelled to speak to you plainly about your future.

When I went to Vancouver Island this week, to check up on my little boy and to see what he's up to as a Parks Canada interpreter, I had more mystical experiences and aha moments, than I have had for a long time. Pennies were dropping all around me.

On my first night I went to an interpretive program in the Green Point campground. A parks interpreter held me captive, spellbound, as she unravelled the story of the sinking of the Valencia in 1906, which led to the development of the world renowned west coast trail. The next evening, with passion and heart, using words like interdependence and cooperation, our son Jordan shared his passion for rainforests – tropical and temperate. On a two hour guided walk through the rainforest the next day, he pointed to a majestic Sitka Spruce and said this tree is estimated to be between 600 and 800 years old. We were silent, awed by its beauty and strength. Quietly, one woman turned to me and said, “I wonder what was happening in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when this tree was first seeded.”

It was my visit to the Ucluelet aquarium that made me really wonder about the church’s purpose and relationship with the community. In a building about 1/3 the size of our sanctuary, crudely built and maintained, people were packed in to see the creatures of the sea, to touch sea urchins and sea cucumbers, to watch how clams and scallops get away from preying sea stars. One tank held a display of the plastic debris found in the Ucluelet inlet. Another displayed what happens when sea water is left to circulate...plankton, and barnacles and other small organisms grow and multiply, creating food and shelter for other sea life. One display was a simple globe, showing an island of garbage the size of Texas which floats unchanged in the Pacific Ocean.

In our bulletin this morning, I have placed a photograph of a sign that hangs in the Ucluelet aquarium. I read it and wept. This is the message I would hope the church preaches every Sunday. This is the message that I believe the world longs to hear. This is the message that will bring lasting peace to a world in conflict. And it was hanging in the Ucluelet aquarium. It’s a quote from a book written by novelist John Steinbeck and his friend, marine biologist Ed Ricketts. In about 1939, they made a trip by boat to the Gulf of California together and found themselves entranced in a mystical journey. I would invite you to turn to that now.

“And it is a strange thing that most of the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical out-crying which is the most prized and used and desired reactions of our species, is really the understanding and the attempt to say man is related to the whole thing, related inextricably to all reality, known and unknown...The knowledge that all things are one and that one thing is all things – plankton, a shimmering phosphorescence on the sea and the spinning planets and an expanding universe, all bound together by the elastic string of time. It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again.”

Later that day when I asked about the local United/Anglican church Jordan said, “Dad, I think that congregation has got their building for sale...they just can’t make it work.” People are packing the campgrounds, the aquariums, the amphitheatres and the parks, the soccer fields, the sea walls, the yoga studios, and the coffee shops of our country to experience something of connection, to know the holy, the sacred, the spirit, or as Ricketts and Steinbeck wrote, to encounter the mystical out-crying which is the most prized and used and desired reactions of our species. And the church, which ought to be about all of that, is selling its buildings to create a revenue stream to do what it has always done.

Jesus says to us this morning, before you decide to follow me, take stock of the cost. He says “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?” With advice on checking the construction costs before building or

budgeting the personnel costs of war before embarking on it, Jesus gives testimony supporting the concept of strategic planning.

Let me get even plainer. In February 2009, you published a document and distributed it widely to the church. It was your Joint Needs Assessment Report and in that document you told the church, the wider church that you want to continue a 100 year history of United Church presence in Lynn Valley, and you were very clear about that. I'm told that other amalgamation options presented themselves but you made it clear you wanted to stay put. You also made it clear that you wanted a revitalized congregation, with a balance of age groups; you wanted to serve more effectively the Emerging Spirit demographic; you wanted more attendance and participation by children and youth; you wanted to upgrade the building and you wanted to redevelop your church property. This is how you understood your call at that time. I wonder if this sounds familiar and accurate?

Shortly after publishing your JNAC report, you went looking for someone to lead you into this future. You wanted a minister to help you move forward with the desire to reach into the community; someone who would assist in the long term plans for the use and redevelopment of the property; someone who would respect church traditions, while appealing to Emerging Spirit demographics. Let me stop for a sec to say we're discovering here, what the \$10 million Emerging Spirit research told us three years ago. The words "tradition" and "Emerging Spirit demographic" don't actually belong in the same sentence. You'll understand now, why we're wrestling with what feels like a significant contradiction. Finally you wanted someone to support you as you experience the change you seek to shape in the world. When the dust all settled, you ended up with me attempting to help you do what you told the church and the world you wanted to do.

I have a friend here in BC Conference who has given up permanent pastoral ministry to undertake a series of two year interim ministries; a young guy with a very promising career, is actually thinking about leaving the church. He's in interim ministry now, because he believes that in a two year period, any congregation he serves can at least dance with the idea that they need to change. At the last general meeting he said to me, Blair most churches are mostly afraid of their own deaths. So they use all the right language in their JNAC reports, but in actual fact, in my experience, they just want to be left alone to do what they've always done, hoping they won't die

The text this morning tells us that to pursue the gospel, to follow in Jesus footsteps, undertaking the most counterculture of activities is seriously costly. Not only do we have to leave behind our first tribe to pursue a more expansive hospitality, he says we need to give up all our possessions. Is Jesus saying to us this morning, everything I have, everything I have worked for, everything I've built, I've saved, I've earned, I have to give up...to what? The church? The community? We can go here if we want. Certainly my Buddhist friend the Venerable Sona from the Birken Monastery near Kamloops might advocate such an ascetic way of life. I'm not sure it's a fruitful conversation.

What we do know from the social sciences and from economics is that if we're not careful, our drive for living the "good life," our desire for a big salary, the big house, the cars, the toys, soon has a way of possessing us. How many times in our week might we say, my life is consuming me?

I think the same can be said for the church. If we're not careful our possessions – our buildings, our investments, our stuff, as well as our activity, the way we've always done things, end up possessing us and they too stand in the way of the changes in how we do ministry that are calling to us from the aquarium, and the sea wall, the soccer field and the coffee shop. These places are saying, ministry must look different, if it is to be at all useful and relevant to those we say we want to encounter. But what we've always done, what we've always had, the songs we've always sung, the ways we've always made decisions possess us. They've got us locked into something the emerging spirit demographic rejected long ago. The mainline denominations, of which we are part, have now two generations missing from their pews.

To pursue a life of faith; for us that's a life of faith in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a life of meaning that people are seeking everywhere but in the church. To pursue this life, I believe Jesus is saying, we must give up our possessions. And I would say the things that possess us. Each of us must take seriously our role in letting go of the possessions of this place that no longer serve us, even if it means risking our death. We're going to die anyway if we don't. I come here to serve you in a palliative care role in the permanent death of this congregation. I came to serve you and support you in the transformation you said you were seeking. The changes are going to be costly. They'll involve the very offering of your lives, giving up what possesses you, for the sake of a relevant spirituality, active hospitality and vital community relationships. This too will feel like death...but trust me, when we do, we'll soon know what it is to experience Easter. May Spirit give us courage, a strong heart, as we open our hearts to the change that calls us. May Spirit give us courage, a strong heart if we don't. Amen.