

Celebrating the life of Tom Sugden, Thursday, December 13, 2017
St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops, BC

I begin with some words of Jan Richardson, a favourite writer, artist and poet.

Blessing When the World is Ending

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.
Somewhere
it has gone completely dark...

...Somewhere
it has ended
with the shattered hope.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone, the television,
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break your heart.
But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything but morose.

It has not come to cause despair.
It is simply here
because there is nothing
a blessing is better suited for
than an ending,
nothing that cries out more
for a blessing
than when a world

is falling apart.
This blessing
will not fix you,
will not mend you,
will not give you false comfort;
it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins again.*

We are celebrating Tom's life in the midst of Advent. For Christians, the year ended a few weeks ago, and the new year has begun with this holy season of waiting in the darkness for light to be born again in this world. As we give thanks for Tom's life among us which has ended, let us "gently turn our faces toward the direction from which the light will come, gathering itself about us as the world begins again."

Advent is a season of prophets. This year we are hearing readings especially from the prophet Isaiah. And every Advent, we hear stories of John the Baptist who stood in the long line of prophets calling people to be renewed in faithfulness to, and love for, God. Prophets are those who stand in the middle of our path – God's troublemakers - pressing us to walk with compassion and justice. But they also speak out of tender hearts to bear witness to God's desire for the healing for our planet, the nations, our relationships, our own hearts when they are broken. Prophets give evidence of the light for which we wait.

I want to tell you that, as a deacon, Tom Sugden stood in their line. Some of us will remember when Tom was ordained deacon in St. Peter's, Williams Lake. The preacher that day was Archdeacon Peter Zimmer. Peter's style of preaching was one in which he often wandered up and down the aisle. I remember that on this day, he asked a question of us: "What do you think is the focal point of the church?" And I'm sure most of us looked to the sanctuary – to the table or the lectern – places where we listen to God's Word and celebrate our life in sacramental sign. But Peter walked from the sanctuary to the doorway of the church, and turned to Tom specifically, but also to all of us gathered, and said something like this:

“Tom - this is the place that must be holy to you. The door is your special, sacred place. As a deacon you are to go out through the door into the streets, to the places where people are hurting. As a deacon you are to welcome all in through the door to a place where hurt can be healed, where hurting people can find a home. And you are to remind us that the ministry of each of must be about these same things.”

In other words take up your prophetic ministry. Stand in the middle of the door, and in the middle of the street. Get in our way so we will pay attention to the needs of the world – the need for love to break into the darkness. Help us “turn our faces gently toward the direction from which the light will come.”

Tom took hold of his ministry in just that way. I remember him as both relentlessly tenacious and deeply caring. Do you know what the word deacon means? Servant. But it is formed from two Greek words – *dia*: “thoroughly” and *konos*: “dust”. A deacon serves God and the world by kicking up dust. One meaning is to hasten – you kick up dust by hastening to serve. But the other is to serve by sometimes being a pain in the neck, a thorn in the side. Both things are about faithfulness.

When I asked Sandra about Tom’s qualities – faithfulness was at the top of the list. Faithful as a husband, father, grandfather. A faithful friend, Faithful in all his relationships, faithful in his relationship to God. Faithful in his ministry as deacon. When Sandra was called to be a priest, and the bishop asked her to go to Vancouver School of Theology, Tom also said yes. They packed up their things and moved there. It was not Tom’s calling, but he supported Sandra gladly and fully. And it was there that he decided to audit courses and I suspect that his own calling to the diaconate was first stirred. As a deacon, Tom gave himself to teaching and to those who were in care homes. There are a lot of servers and assistants in this Cathedral and elsewhere who benefitted from his teaching when he was liturgical deacon here.

The last real conversation I had with him was in the early fall, and it was about his taking services at Chartwell. It was a precious gift to him, and he voiced some concern that he might have to give it up sooner rather than later. But he was tenacious and caring – faithful to this ministry until three weeks ago when he was no longer physically able to continue.

Tom was unafraid to speak his mind and he was unafraid to speak God’s mind. He was prepared to kick up a little dust. He had a strong heart – in every sense. And he used it to give heart to others.

Tom died last week just as he and Sandra were moving into their new home. Sandra allowed as how it was a little unreasonable of Tom to choose moving day for the letting go of this life. No kidding! Kicking up some dust! But maybe we can see it as that prophetic stance of standing in the way to remind us that our focus is to be the door – the place where God speaks to us in our coming in and our going out as today’s psalm says. The place where life is changing, where

journeys begin and end, where we bump up against truths, experiences, grace – that call us to a deep trust in God, and God’s faithfulness.

We need to peer into the dark in order to look for the light. We need to pay honour to, and care gently for, our tears in order to know joy. We need to acknowledge our lack of home in order to find home. Jan Richardson has reflected on this paradox of finding joy in the midst of sorrow:

Blessing to Summon Rejoicing

When your weeping
has watered the earth.

When the storm has been long
and the night, and the season of your sorrowing.

When lack.
When trouble.
When fear.
When pain.

When empty.
When lonely.
When too much of what depletes you
and not enough of what restores
and rests you.

Then let there be rejoicing.

Then let there be dreaming.

Let there be
laughter in your mouth
and on your tongue
shouts of joy.

Let the seeds
soaked by tears
turn to grain,
to bread,
to feasting.

Let there be
coming home.*

This Advent marks for Tom and for all of us an ending and a beginning. We wait for Emmanuel. God with us. God with Tom, Tom with God. God with us. Homecoming. We wait for the light of Emmanuel....

Ah, but we will celebrate Tom’s life well, and enlarge and bless our own lives too, if we kick up a little dust. Amen.

**These reflections, and many others from Jan Richardson, can be found on her website:
paintedprayerbook.com*