

Practicing Resurrection

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

For folks in liturgical churches, Easter is not just a day. It is a fifty-day long season in which we celebrate resurrection: new life, new hope, new joy.

Thirty-five years ago, in 1998, during this season of new life, I conducted the funeral of a very dear friend. I'll call him Bill. He was a colleague, a minister, a scholar, a brilliant preacher, a modest man, and a dear friend. He was married to Shirley, who was also a minister, also a friend.

Ten years earlier, after a particularly long and fractious meeting, we were debriefing in a bar. Bill leaned forward and said quietly, "I've been diagnosed with leukemia." It was a punch in the gut. He was only 35 years old, active and healthy. We talked well into the night about what this meant for him and Shirley. We talked about life and death, about pain and wholeness, about joy and sorrow, about faith and trust. Mostly, we talked about loss. We talked about all those important things which always seem to catch us by surprise, because the everyday stuff so often crowds out the important stuff.

For the next year, we decided to be together as often as we could. We shared meals and other nights in bars. We went to plays and concerts. We spent quiet nights at home talking, laughing, reminiscing, hoping.

A year later, we were in that same bar again. Once again, Bill said very quietly, "I'm in remission. The leukemia is gone." No one expected this. Bill's earlier diagnosis was definitive. The doctors were more surprised than anyone. There was no logical explanation. This wasn't supposed to happen; but it did.

I almost fell out of my chair. I babbled for a while, as people do when they don't know what to say. "What a grand surprise, Bill!"

He leaned back, smiled that wonderful little smile he had, and said, "Yes, it really is wonderful news."

And then Bill asked a question which has been with me ever since. "But how do you learn to live again after you've prepared to die?"

Bill had spent the past year rearranging his life and his priorities. He had decided to do what was important to him. He simplified his life. He stopped spending energy on things which sapped life out of him. He would focus more clearly on the things he was convinced were the gifts given to him by God to love other people. His life became more focussed. He took more time to read and think. He spent as much time with Shirley as he could, and with his friends and family.

And now, he was faced with another major challenge. One of the things I treasure about Bill is that in his own gentle way, Bill taught me to look beneath the surface. I learned to ask deeper and harder questions. How do you learn to live again after you've prepared to die?

The question asks about transformation and resurrection. To borrow a phrase which comes from Wendell Berry's poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," how can we "practice resurrection"? Berry urges us to "every day do something that won't compute." He calls us to be grounded in nature, with creation. I encourage you to google it, read it, act on it.

For Bill, it marked another time of change. He revised the plans he had made after his diagnosis for the longer term. He made different hard choices as he learned to live again. He didn't do it very well sometimes. None of us do. That's the trouble with taking a question like this seriously. How do you learn to live again? We can't learn the answers from a book, or from a teacher. You simply start. You start to live. You determine what's important. You determine who is important. You experiment. You try some things, and if they don't work, you try some other things.

Bill came to my mind last week as I wrote my column about feeling like we're living in an endless Good Friday. But Sunday's coming!

We are living in a time of pain and brokenness. Gun violence. Authoritarian despots, and wannabe authoritarian despots. A time of such deep division that we have forgotten how to talk to each other. The rise of white nationalism, and the deep prejudice embedded in it. A time when women are no longer able to make decisions about their own bodies. When white politicians tell schools and universities which revisionist form of history they are allowed to teach. When the leader of the opposition (which is supposed to be the loyal opposition) has nothing to offer except angry words of attack and division. When the disease of homelessness and addiction continues to rise because leaders can't figure out how to deal with it. The list goes on and on.

It would be so easy to fall into despair, to give up hope, to not give a damn about anything except ourselves.

Sunday's coming. It may not be obvious to us. Sometimes hope and joy and life are too well hidden.

Bill teaches me that we can practice resurrection. We can learn how we might live again. The only way to begin is to begin. We will make a pile of mistakes. We will screw up. But if we keep our focus on life, on hope, on joy, on loving and serving the neighbour, I am convinced we will learn to live again.

My hunch is that that's what Easter is all about. The raising of one man is an invitation to all of us to undertake the journey of learning to live again.

For ten wonderful years on this earth, Bill did so. I treasure his invitation to join him on the journey. It gives me courage and hope to continue the same journey in these difficult and fractious days.