

Vestry Sermon 2025
Roots and Wings: Lessons in Community
Belonging and Freedom

The wonderful Christian writer Eugene Peterson was for advice on choosing a church. Here is what he said in a podcast interview:

MR. PETERSON: And my usual answer was go to the closest church where you live, and the smallest. And if after six months it's just not working, go to the next smallest. [*laughs*]

MS. TIPPETT: [*laughs*] OK, so what is it about small rather than big?

MR. PETERSON: Because you have to deal with people as they are. And you've got to learn how to love them when they're not loveable.

End quote.

In this part of Luke's gospel – the second part of the sermon on the plain – Jesus is guiding us in how to be in relationship in community, because these are the places of transformation.

In small communities – we cannot hide, we cannot move from one relationship to another when conversations get harder.

Listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the gospel in the Message:

To you who are ready for the truth, I say this:

Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person... If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

(The Message paraphrase)

In community, we get to exercise the muscles of sharing what is really going on (taking the masks off), asking for what we need, attending to other people's needs, saying yes to what we feel led to do and standing by our no's for the things we do not feel called to do.

This sounds basic. But over time, it is some of the hardest spiritual and emotional work.

Being on a level plain with each other – we dig deep into the value of loving our neighbour as we love ourselves.

In Luke's gospel, the writer is adamant that love is not just a sentiment but it has grit. A loving community can become a place of human flourishing. Where we nurture belonging and freedom. Roots and Wings.

When Luke refers to Loving our enemies – this is not the worst person we can imagine, this is the person sitting next to you in Vestry or Parish Council who is wearing the black hat and saying all the things you don't agree with.

And enemy can also refer to the voice in your head that has a critical commentary that we need to befriend and have compassion with ourselves.

Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst.

I would like to share of a friendship that began in my mid twenties on the very first day of graduate school in Vancouver. I met a woman who was at the same age and stage of life as I was and we seemed to 'click'. We were both new to Vancouver, she was from Virginia and I am from South Africa. At first the conversation was easy, light as we shared about things we had discovered in Vancouver – you know where to buy cheap umbrellas and do you know the '99' only stops at certain bus stops!

After a few interactions we decided to walk together once a week. During the first few walks I switched into a role that I was most comfortable in, the one of asking questions. I could get away with sharing very little and probe into all her issues in life – while I got away with looking well um 'perfect'. But she would not take this. She soon cottoned onto my façade and I can still remember the day she said to me: "Sharon, I feel like all I do when I am with you is talk. I am done talking. I know nothing about you." I was shocked and felt bruised, I found myself fumbling for words. None of my rehearsed stories would cut it. I had to really think and be honest.

This was a painful time for me. I felt like my masks were being destroyed. I was confronted with my weaknesses and I realized that my way of seeing the world was not the only way. Our cultural differences became more obvious and there were many times that I wanted to give up on this friendship. I thought that I did not need her. But I did!

At the time I was reading Jean Vanier's book: Community and Growth. In it he speaks of two kinds of friends:

The first are called sympathizers – These are people who we get along great with, they affirm us and encourage us. Sympathizers see the world as we do.

The second kind of friends, Vanier calls antipathizers – these friends push our buttons, undo all our facades and help us see our blindspots. They bring healing. Vanier says that we need these friends to make us more like Christ.

This friend became my go to person for honest feedback – I could also count on her to tell it like it was.

Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst.

As followers of Christ, we are invited to develop a community where our lives can be transformed together, by the working of the Spirit and a commitment to faithful service. To stay when things get hard. Growing roots.

And there is also time where we need to give each other the freedom to spread our wings.

Community is its best, when we can celebrate what we do and give inside the community and celebrate what we do and give outside the community.

We need belonging to have freedom.

Belonging and freedom, roots and wings is a metaphor that describes the idea of having a strong sense of where you come from (roots) while also having the ability to explore and pursue our own path independently (wings), they signify the need for both stability and autonomy in life.

The part of our gospel text that is always troubling is the part about accepting it, when someone is taking unfair advantage of us.

And over the past years, I have unpacked this statement of Jesus demonstrating how in first century culture left and right hands were used for different purposes (one for eating and the other for ablutions). Striking with both hands mixes up disparaging and respectful gestures.

So in our culture, when is enough enough? When do we walk away out of self-respect? We each have a threshold.

Some of us have been trained by our families of origin to accept quite a bit of unfair treatment and just take it.

This is where loving communities of faith and friendship can see things, before we can. To guide us toward a ‘no’ in a particular relationship – to say this is enough. I cannot remain in this relationship, I am losing myself.

Today in our Anglican church is considered **Freedom Sunday – a Sunday when we pay particular attention to the atrocity and injustice of Human Trafficking.**

And I would be missing an opportunity, if I didn't take some time as part of this reflection to address how we as a community and as loving citizens can be on the look out when a person has become the property of another person.

**The United Nations Defines Human Trafficking in this way:
Human Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.**

And it is our civil duty to report and get help if we see some of the following warning signs in our neighbours:

Let me name a few:

Warning Signs that someone may be a victim of Human trafficking include:

- Being controlled by others, driven to and from locations, and escorted at all times;
- Being controlled and watched by others, having someone speak for them in public;
- Not having a passport or other forms of I.D. in their possession;
- Not having control of their own money or cellphone, may have more than one cellphone in their possession
- Passport and ID documents confiscated by others
- Not being familiar with the neighborhood they live or work in;
- Being moved frequently; claim to be “new” or “just visiting”
- Not being allowed to contact family or friends,
- Lying about age/false ID;
- Providing scripted or rehearsed answers to casual questions; and
- May be in possession of excess cash outside their financial means and have hotel keys
- Act in a fearful, anxious, submissive or nervous manner, excessive concern about displeasing partner/employer
- Fearful of law enforcement or immigration services
- Avoids eye contact, has another person speak for them
- May have visible signs of substance dependency
- Expressing fear and intimidation through facial expressions or body language;
- May be dressed in age inappropriate clothing
- May be dressed in clothing inappropriate for the time of year or context
- May suddenly have expensive clothing, purses, shoes, nail services
- May have bruises or other signs of physical abuse including malnourished

- Lacking in basic medical services or is being denied services by employer
- May show signs of being physically restrained, confinement or torture

Victims may:

- Not know they are being victimized because they have a relationship with their trafficker – it could be their boyfriend or friend;
- Not appear to need assistance because they have a place to live, food to eat, nice clothes, medical care and even a “paying job”;
- Be unaware of their rights, or may have been intentionally misinformed about their rights so they don’t know they can receive help;
- Be taught to distrust and fear the government and law enforcement officers because they are afraid they will get arrested or deported (if from another country);
- Feel alone, isolated, helpless with nowhere else to turn. Subsequently they will do as they are told;
- Fear for their safety or the safety of someone known to them, as some traffickers will threaten to harm the victim, their friends or family members if they report their situation to, or cooperate with law enforcement; and
- Feel as though they have a debt to “pay back” – for things like gifts, drugs, accommodation, recruitment fees etc
- Suffer trauma and psychological effects. In human trafficking related to sexual exploitation, the victims may be exposed to higher incidences of HIV and sexually transmitted infections.

The Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline has resumed operating 24 hours, 7 days a week. If you are in need of assistance, please call 1-833-900-1010.

Being on a level plain with each other in the care of God – we dig deep into the value of loving our neighbour as we love ourselves.

May it be so.

Amen.