

‘Where Faith Meets Life (and Death)’
29 April, 2012
Local Ecumenical Partnership Joint Service
at St. Bartholomew’s, Holton
Easter 4B
1 John 3:16-24
John 10:11-18
Rev’d. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen

My first solo pastorate concluded with the closing of the congregation I had been serving for four years. It was a small congregation by American standards—at least, in the denomination I was then serving, and given where we lived. We thought it was a good Sunday if we had 30 people in worship, and Easter and Christmas felt like booming crowds because we’d sometimes see as many as 80 people come through the doors.

When colleagues heard that I was walking the congregation through the paces of closing, preparing them to die to their present way of being as a neighbourhood church, I heard more than once, “Are you sure you want to do this? You’ll get a reputation as being ‘The angel of death.’ You should let another minister do it—move on and let someone else take over.”

It was this experience of working with a church that ‘died’ that qualified me to speak a week and a half ago on the subject of ‘Managing Decline in the Churches’.

The first thing I did with the group that gathered was to ask them why they had specifically requested a seminar on this particular topic. What I heard were responses similar to the laments I’ve heard in other places and in every place I’ve lived with respect to the crisis the church is facing. I suspect some of you have said or heard these same things:

“We’re dying.”

“I do more funerals than baptisms, and those who bring their children for baptism don’t ever come back to church after that. It’s hard to grow a congregation with those dynamics.”

“Where are the young people? It’s been years since we had an active Sunday School. And the younger adults who do come to church don’t want to do the work, or *can’t* do the work because of all their other commitments.”

“People don’t believe what they used to believe. People challenge all of the beliefs of the church today, whether they’re inside or outside of the Church.”

“Churches just don’t command the status or influence they used to in the community. What are we doing wrong?”

“How can we be successful as ministers if all we do are funerals and no one wants to come to church anymore? How did we become so irrelevant?”

All of the observations were poignant, and filled with emotion. But those last two questions are particularly plaintive, despairing—and telling.

We live in a world that defines success by growth—and especially growth in numbers and activity. And decline is generally seen as a death-knell, despite the

obvious faults in that assumption. (If we've learnt anything from the recent years of economic crisis, it ought to be that biggering is not always the same as bettering.)

But churches are made up of people who operate in environments where expansion and productivity and numbers matter. And those values, along with the high premiums we place on entertainment and 'relevance' and fashionability these days, accompany the people into church and shape the ways we think about what makes for meaningful and successful church life.

It's hard not to! I know I'm not the only one who's wrestled with how to attract more people to services and events at the two worshipping communities I serve. Not because I want to feel popular, but because I believe that what we do here is important. The issues and questions we engage in our church communities regarding where faith in God meets daily life—in every aspect, from family life to work, to politics, to science, art, literature, finances, sexuality, the environment, friends, community, the stranger and outsiders, death and loss, grief, and everything in between—these are questions and issues that matter. Because the ways we answer them shape our world and our choices. They determine how we live and the quality and depth of our character and understanding of what it is we're doing with the number of days we have apportioned to us.

Where does your faith meet up with life? And how does it face up to death?

Mostly, we're afraid of death—and by death I mean not just the moment that someone we love expires, or of our own last breath. I'm talking about death in all the ways it presents itself—as Sister Ruth Burrows puts it, “all the diminishments that are mini-deaths, things that damage our sense of self, make us feel insecure, unhappy, and so on.” And our fear of death keeps us from living in complete freedom, with abandon.

Ruth Burrows is a Carmelite Sister whom Rowan Williams commissioned to write a book for the Anglican Communion to read during Lent for this year. The title of her book is *Love Unknown*—it's about prayer and the Christian life. In an interview, it was suggested that she seems in her book to be addressing Christian anxieties—a sense of failure and inadequacy in achieving the Christian life, for example. She was asked, “What do you say to someone facing this anxiety?”

Her response was: “I think that anxiety and fear of some kind are part and parcel of being human. I would go so far as to suggest that fear, recognized or not, is our dominant emotion. Our instinct is to run away from fear, to shut it out, to draw the curtains against the dark, to keep ourselves busy, busy, busy so that it doesn't confront us.

She continued, “To Christians, I would suggest that they make a note of how many times in the Gospels Jesus addresses this inherent fear: ‘Be not afraid.’ When we think about it, he is the only one able to say this with authority, for he is the answer to our fears—to all of them.”¹

1 *Christian Century*, April 4, 2012, p. 11

I wonder how many of us would proclaim with confidence that Jesus is indeed the answer to all our fears. And yet, I believe Sister Ruth is right.

Among highly-educated professionals and nonprofessionals alike, faith is not terribly popular or highly regarded in our time. Radical doubt and skepticism seem more valued as a way of engaging the world than does the way of faith and trust, and a willingness to adopt a posture of naïveté with regard to certain issues or questions is frequently scorned. And both within and outside the churches, it seems like the loudest voices proclaiming, ‘This is what it means to be a Christian’; or ‘If you don’t believe this, you’re not a real Christian’ are often the most strident and abrasive—and always problematically selective in the material that’s being presented as representative of the whole tradition.

At the moment, the prevailing religion seems to be a sort of scientism, which suggests that everything that *can* be understood, can be understood scientifically—and usually, there will be a demand for empirical evidence to substantiate any claims. Which, of course, flies in the face of the very nature of faith if we recognize the truth of what the author of Hebrews 11:1 was saying when he wrote, ‘Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.’

Social paradigms or frameworks have shifted dramatically even in my own relatively brief lifetime—and more than once. And those shifts in understanding represent a kind of loss. So, at that workshop last week, we spent a bit of time naming all of the different kinds of loss that church-goers and people of faith have experienced in the last few decades. And the list was long.

One of the very common results or effects of profound loss is anxiety.

It’s undeniable: the Church of today and so many Christians are anxious. Anxious about the future of the Church, anxious about the declining role of faith, anxious about the constant and insurmountable pace of change at every level and way of being in our society. And beneath that anxiety, as Sister Ruth correctly points out, is fear. Fear of loss. Fear of death and the painful realities that accompany grief. Fear of irrelevance, or of wasted effort. Fear of what others might think. Fear of further decline. Fear that we won’t find the answers we’re looking for. And that fear keeps us from really living.

Managing decline is the wrong way of seeing things for people of faith, really. Our current situation is more properly understood, I think, as an invitation to really live into what we say we believe. It’s an opportunity and a challenge to people of faith to get clear about what’s most important to us. What does it mean to us, to say that we’re Christian?

Do we allow *others* to define what faith and a relationship with God in Christ Jesus is? Or do we claim the authority and appropriateness of telling the story ourselves, as those actually trying to live lives of faith and conviction?

The writer of our epistle lesson extends a strong challenge—one that invites us to understand that the way we tell our story is not just verbal. He writes, ‘Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.’ Words are important—necessary, even. But they don’t tell the *whole* story of love. You can’t

love just with words—the words need substance, like flesh on bones; true love is active, it's alive. It's by living our story, by embodying our beliefs and convictions that others are persuaded of the truth and power of divine love.

I think one reason that Christian churches are declining is because so many of us are falling short of our potential to love in truth and action—we aren't boldly living what we say we believe. And if we aren't living our faith, then it's nothing more than a pile of empty words. And God knows there are too many of those lying around.

People were compelled by the way Jesus lived his life and by what he said as he explained the truth of God and the kingdom of heaven, because the two lined up with each other—compelled enough to drop everything and follow him, devoting their lives to trying to understand what in the world it was that gave him such peace and joy and freedom. It's one thing to give verbal assent to a belief that seems impossible. It's another thing altogether to live your impossible conviction into reality. Who would have believed that Jesus' agenda had sticking power on Good Friday?

In our gospel lesson, Jesus speaks the inspiring and empowering words: “The Father loves me because I lay down my life, to receive it back again. No one takes it away from me; I am laying it down of my own free will. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to receive it back again . . .”(John 10:17-18)

How liberating it is to know that we are free to make our own choice! No one takes our life or our love from us, especially with regard to our faith—but we are free to choose to live into what we believe to be true about God and God's promises. When we love and live courageously, without worrying about what we might be sacrificing, we come to resemble Jesus more and more.

That little congregation I served in my early days of ordained ministry really struggled at first to choose death. They did not want to stop meeting and gathering in the ways they always had—although they all knew they weren't really living as they were. There were tears, and there was anger, and some felt as though they weren't being given a choice but rather were being forced to lay down their lives. At the end of it all, though, we collectively decided to test and see what kind of resurrection life lie in wait for all of us.

That small congregation of believers chose to lay down their lives, their habits, their personal preferences and desires—their visions of being buried from the same church that their parents and spouses had been, where they had occupied the same pew for decades, where they had seen their children baptized and married; they chose to give up the weekly experience of being surrounded by the cosy memories that hung from every rafter and beam of that familiar place, and to say, “It is finished.”

The church closed, but its story did not end. What the people who dared to lay down their lives discovered was that God was ahead of them, already preparing a place for them in the churches where they now worship. The remaining members wound up going to a few different churches, each of which was closer to their respective homes, and each of which is thriving and offered them opportunities to feel

more alive and joyous than they had in years. They're now involved in ministries that are helping them to grow, rather than reminding them each Sunday that they are just a breath away from death.

Most importantly, they discovered that even if they *were* a mere breath away from death, that's no bad thing—because ours is a God who isn't stopped by death, or any of life's countless diminishments. The God who created all of life hasn't stopped speaking, hasn't stopped creating, hasn't stopped bringing life from things that looked dead.

Hallelujah! Amen.