



Richmond Hill Reflections

SIXTH SUNDAY IN EASTER, RHUC, May 26, 2019 (Preached by Linda Butler)

"Living between Ending and New Beginning" (Acts 1:1-14)

It was just this time of year when leaves are appearing and trees, blossoming, when grass is growing and frogs are singing. I was a child dipping my glass jar into a pond. Fascinated, I watched the tadpoles swimming. I brought them home, knowing my parents would support my desire to raise them. Days passed of faithful feeding and periodic tank cleaning. Then one morning I looked, and looked again: one tadpole was beginning to sprout legs. My sister, the Latin scholar, named that one "Primus". There followed "Secundus", "Tertius" - you get the idea. Soon, the tadpoles could no longer simply swim around: they needed to be able to haul themselves out onto dry land. They were not really tadpoles, but they were not yet the tiny tree frogs they would become.

The disciples are somewhat like those tadpole /frogs. For three years they have been following Jesus: watching him restore the wounded and broken to wholeness and fullness of life; listening to his teaching; having conversations with him on the road and around dinner tables. But just as the tadpoles' non-stop swimming came to a halt as legs sprouted so the disciples' journey suddenly ended on a Thursday in a quiet moonlit garden. They have learned how to be in community with Jesus, but where will they go; what will they do; who will they be without him? How will they live between this ending and the promised new beginning?

Can you relate? Have there been times when you too have wondered how you are going to carry on with your life between an ending and a new beginning?

Her name was Anna. She and her elderly mother lived on the main street in Coldwater. One morning, Anna was called into her supervisor's office. Now, for ten years, she had offered this organization her dedicated service. Her annual reviews had all been glowing. Without preamble, she was informed her employment was terminated. A security guard escorted her first to her desk to retrieve her personal effects, then to the door. There was no opportunity to speak to anyone, let alone say a proper goodbye. An absolutely stunned and stricken Anna found herself standing outside on the sidewalk, at a loss what to do next.

His name is Michael. He is the hero in John Grisham's novel, *Street Lawyer*. He is contentedly working his seventy hour weeks in a prestigious law firm, on course soon to make partner and be financially set for life. Then he encounters "Mister", a homeless man, wrongfully evicted to make way for a major development. Mister's death leads Michael to the street legal clinic where Mister was a client, a soup kitchen, a shelter - places he knew existed, but had never visited. Michael's life is turned upside down. Despite the urging of family and colleagues, he cannot carry on along his old path - his eyes have been opened to injustice and his ears, unstopped to the cries of the poor, the dispossessed. His world has been forever changed. But what direction should his life now take?

Her name was Irene. She was active in Greenridge United Church, and the Women's Institute. Like most Manitoba farm women, Irene was the one who kept the books for the family business; at harvest, she drove truck while her husband handled the combine; she regularly ferried their two children long distances so that they could participate in social and sports activities. For years, Irene had been coping with diabetes. Her blood sugar levels had always been hard to manage. Being caught in a blizzard without her insulin was the last straw - Irene began to lose her sight. This spelled the end to many of her roles as a farm wife. As a blind person, what would she do; who would she be?

They were the Patterson family: Mom was in charge of the Sunday School at Eady United Church; Dad was always ready to lend a hand; their six year old son was a shining star in Learning Together; his four and two year old sisters were not far behind. When a drunk driver ploughed into their truck, the Mom was killed; the boy, so badly injured, he was taken to Sick Kids; the girls were shaken, but basically alright. The Dad who hadn't been in the vehicle was suddenly a single parent with three children, one of whom now had special needs. How was he supposed to manage?

How do we live between an ending and a new beginning? Tomorrow marks the thirty-fifth anniversary of my ordination. In those years I have seen a few endings. Even the structure of the United Church has not remained the same. When Warren and I arrived in Richmond Hill, we were in York Presbytery. Then the decision was made to merge all the Presbyteries in Toronto Conference into four. We became part of Living Waters with an office in Guthrie near Barrie, and meetings that could be as far North as Huntsville. When I learned that Presbyteries were going to be eliminated, and regions created as we moved from a four to a three court system, I wasn't that concerned. I would be retired, and therefore not involved. Little did I know: retirement has seen me supervising three ministry students, and filling in for the Living Waters Chair of Education and Students while she was on sabbatical. On a silent retreat last summer, I was moved to put my name forward to be on Candidacy Board for regions 10 and 6. So here I am, working with what is for me, the third system for identifying and preparing people for ministry. Last November I went through three days of training on Candidacy Pathways. We have manuals to consult and a minister of vocation to guide, but we are trying to navigate that space between the old and the new.

It is not easy to make the transition from an ending to a new beginning. Just ask Jesus' disciples. It is all very well for an angel to scold them for standing there, looking up into heaven, but what are they supposed to do? How are they going to manage without Jesus right there, by their side? So what action do they take? According to the author of Acts, they return to Jerusalem. They gather in an upper room - not just the remaining eleven disciples - but Jesus' mother and brothers, and the women who have followed Jesus, some of whom like Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and Susanna are named in the gospel of Luke.

Jesus' followers do not go off on their own separate ways; they come together in community. Anna may have been deliberately isolated at her office, but she did not hole up in her home: she reached out to family, friends, her community of faith. She told her story again and again, until the shock lessened; the reality sunk in, and she was ready to consider her next career path. Even as his wife divorced him and his colleagues shunned him, Michael allowed himself to be taken under the wing of a street lawyer and a volunteer at a soup kitchen. With their help, he became familiar with a different context, and once more a beginner, learned the appropriate skills. Irene turned to the women in the WI and UCW for support and encouragement as the CNIB helped her discover new ways to fulfil old tasks while taking on totally new roles like becoming an advocate for insulin pumps. Right after the funeral, the Patterson Dad brought his girls to church. He had done his best to get them ready, but hair slipping from barettes, and knee socks - one up and one down - testified to their mother's absence. Hearts broke, but arms reached out. The lines in our United Church Creed - "God is with us. We are not alone" - were not just words on a page. This family in their loss and grief was held and supported. This weekend, Shining Waters Region is gathered in Barrie, creating connections that might give rise to clusters and networks to carry out the mission and ministry none of us can do on our own. The Candidacy Board I am on has grown from 4 to 12 people, each bringing their own gifts and experience. We still aren't sure how the Pathways to Candidacy system will work in practice, but together, we are learning as we start our interviewing and decision making.

The disciples - both women and men - plus members of Jesus' family gather together in an upper room. While there is doubtless conversation - sharing of memories and stories - they have come together for prayer. Now, I grew up in a United Church tradition where the emphasis was on the Word read and preached, and the minister could be relied upon to deliver a long pastoral prayer in which he hardly seemed to pause to breathe. It was a relief when he got to the point of praying for our sovereign Queen Elizabeth for then I knew the end was near! Only as an adult on retreat did I sit with a group in silence - we had read scripture; we had sung chants; we had offered God our prayers of thanksgiving and intercession - now, in the stillness, we simply listened for the Spirit's breath. In that circle, I learned that just as good conversation involves speaking and listening so prayer requires both.

Living between ending and new beginning is always challenging whether we are disciples in the first or twenty-first century. Thanks be to God, we are never alone on the journey. Thanks be to God for the Spirit to inspire and guide, challenge and comfort us. Amen.