

“When I Get Where I’m Going”

August 6, 2017
Romans 8: 18-25 & John 3: 12-16

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A friend sent me this story recently in an email.

As a bagpiper, I play many gigs. Recently I was asked by a funeral director to play at a graveside service for a homeless man. He had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the Nova Scotia back country.

As I was not familiar with the backwoods, I got lost and, being a typical man, I didn't stop for directions. I finally arrived an hour late and saw the funeral guy had evidently gone and the hearse was nowhere in sight.

There were only the diggers and crew left and they were eating lunch. I felt badly and apologized to the men for being late.

I went to the side of the grave and looked down and the vault lid was already in place. I didn't know what else to do, so I started to play. The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. I played out my heart and soul for this man with no family and friends.

I played like I've never played before for this homeless man. And as I played "Amazing Grace", the workers began to weep. They wept, I wept, we all wept together. When I finished, I packed up my bagpipes and started for my car.

Though my head was hung low, my heart was full. As I opened the door to my car, I heard one of the workers say, "I've never seen anything like that before, and I've been putting in septic tanks for twenty years."

Apparently, I'm still lost....guess it's a man thing.

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I really struggled finding something to talk about today. I don't know how full time ministers do it; coming up with new messages almost every week. It is truly a gift of God to be able to do that.

Most times in my role in the United Church as a Licensed Lay Worship Leader (LLWL) I find that God uses me best when I speak about my life experiences. Trouble with that is I often wonder if or when I'll get to the point where I have nothing left to talk about.

But then when I take a minute and sit down and actually ask God....well he's been faithful to guide me.

So; after asking God to give me that nudge; I turned to look at the lectionary readings. I made a mistake and actually looked at the reading for a couple of weeks ago (or maybe it wasn't a mistake) as that week's reading from Romans reminded me of our eternal hope in Jesus Christ and our promise of everlasting life ...and I thought maybe I do have some experience I can talk about.

I know it seems kinda silly, strange, even unusual; but I rather like doing funerals.

I could joke and say that people rarely talk back to you at a funeral; but the main reason I like doing a funeral is that I get to offer hope. I get to offer love and support and caring. And that just seems to fill me with hope too.

More and more these days you read in the paper where "it was a person's wish' to not have visitation or a funeral. My own personal view is that a funeral isn't for the person who has passed, but it more for the ones left behind.

At times of loss it is helpful and comforting to gather together to show love and support. People want to 'do' something. It's hard when we're not allowed to act. And I think a funeral or memorial helps those left behind to find closure and be able to move ahead in life.

Again this is only my feeling and I know the circumstances vary....and if that's what works for you that's okay.

Two weeks after I got my license as a LLWL back in 2002 a good friend's mother died. Their family didn't really attend any church but they wanted a funeral in their local church and they asked me to do it. Doing funerals wasn't in any way a part of our training as LLWL's, but my minister at the time supported me and helped me put a service together.

Since signing up for the LLWL course many of my old friends had been struggling with what to make of me now that I'd gotten "religious"! This was the first time for them to see me in this new role. They mainly knew me as the party girl who disc jockeyed at all their celebrations and then partied long into the night with them.

There were a lot of jaws dropping that day. One friend called me the "new vicar" and several indicated they'd like me to do their service someday. So began a new direction for me. I've done quite a few funerals, some for the old gang; many of them not connected with a church, and others for neighbours and sometimes filling in for a minister who was away.

It hit me hard one day as I drove to a reception after doing a funeral for a long-time friend from the 'old gang'. It came to me how I used to play

(or dj) at all their weddings and anniversaries...now I'm doing their funerals! Wow, how things have changed.

About ten years ago now I was asked to introduce the new minister in town to a family who were losing their eight year old son to cancer. We actually met them the morning their son, Denver passed away. Even though I didn't actually lead the funeral; Rev. Mike asked me to help because I was a friend of the family. He gave me this story to read: It's often used to make it easier for children to understand about death...but the adults were paying pretty close attention too! You may have heard it before ....

### ***Water Bugs and Dragonflies - by Doris Stickney***

*Down below the surface of a quiet pond lived a little colony of water bugs. They were a happy colony, living far away from the sun. For many months they were very busy, scurrying over the soft mud on the bottom of the pond.*

*They did notice that every once in a while one of their colony seemed to lose interest in going about. Clinging to the stem of a pond lily it gradually moved out of sight and was seen no more.*

*"Look!" said one of the water bugs: "One of our colony is climbing up the lily stalk. Where do you think she is going?" Up, up, up it slowly went. And as they watched, the water bug disappeared from sight.*

*Its friends waited and waited but it didn't return.*

*"That's funny!" said one water bug to another. "Wasn't she happy here?" asked a second. "Where do you suppose she went?" wondered a third.*

*No one had an answer. They were greatly puzzled. Finally one of the water bugs, a leader in the colony, gathered its friends together.*

*"I have an idea". The next one of us who climbs up the lily stalk must promise to come back and tell us where they went and why.*

*"We promise", they all agreed. One spring day, not long after; the very water bug who had suggested the plan found himself climbing up the lily stalk. Up, up, up, he went.*

*Before he knew what was happening, he had broke through the surface of the water and fallen onto the broad, green lily pad above. He looked about with surprise. He couldn't believe what he saw.*

*A startling change had come to his old body. His movement revealed four silver wings and a long tail. He felt an impulse to move his wings...The warmth of the sun soon dried the moisture from the new body. He moved his wings again and suddenly found himself up above the water. He had become a dragonfly!!*

*Swooping and dipping he flew through the air. He felt exhilarated in the new atmosphere. By and by the new dragonfly lighted happily on a lily pad to rest.*

*Then he chanced to look below to the bottom of the pond. Why, he was right above his old friends, the water bugs! There they were scurrying around, just as he had been doing a short time before.*

*The dragonfly remembered the promise: "The next one of us who climbs up the lily stalk will come back and tell where they went and why." Without thinking, the dragonfly darted down. He hit the surface of the water and bounced away. Now that he was a dragonfly, he could no longer go into the water...*

*"I can't return!" he said in dismay. "I tried but I can't keep my promise. Even if I could go back, not one of the water bugs would know me in my new body. I guess I'll just have to wait until they become dragonflies too. Then they'll understand what has happened to me, and where I went."*

*And the dragonfly flew off happily into its wonderful new world of sun and air.....*

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I remember clearly how this story brought understanding and hope at Denver's funeral. I still have no idea how I was able to read this without losing it; only that God gave me the strength.

Our very own Rev. Kimberly Heath often describes dying this way... "we pass from life, through death; and enter into eternal life."

Like the water bugs... full of life one day

Then climbing the lily stalk ... or passing through death ...

And then like dragonflies – getting new bodies, being free and renewed... we too enter into that new and wonderful life eternal.

Later that day at the cemetery...it was noticed that several Dragonflies were flying around.

A few years later at Denver's Aunts wedding, a dragonfly rested a long time on her shoulder during the taking of the wedding pictures.

The dragonfly has become a reminder to this family that Denver is safe at home and at perfect peace in the arms of Jesus and is never farther away from them than their loving memories of him. Even now (ten years later) there is still a group of family and close friends who call themselves Denver's Dragonflies and they continue to organize events to raise awareness and funding for cancer research.

It's hard for us to understand why things happen the way they do. Sometimes there is neither rhyme nor any good reason in our limited understanding of why things happen.

There are tragic accidents, natural and man-made disasters, illness and disease. Some of us go at a good old age and others way before their time. Again in our eyes.

In 1 Corinthians 13:12 we hear: *Now we see things imperfectly, like murky reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.*

It helps to understand that in biblical days mirrors were not made of glass like today. They were polished silver or other materials that only gave that 'murky' reflection. It gives me hope to know that someday our questions will be answered...that someday we will see clearly the whole picture....the way Jesus sees.

Then there is the other end of the spectrum. I once did a funeral (or should I say a celebration of life) for Dorothy who put in a full and active 101 years of quality living. Even though her last years were in nursing home she was sharp to the very end.

The service was filled with smiles and happy memories and lots of love and laughter. Who could be upset at losing this woman who had left such a long legacy of a life well lived.

We are supposed to live our lives to the fullest. Make the best of every day we are given. And as the saying goes: "Live well, laugh often and love much."

Wall Street has seen its share of loss ... some of them harder to fathom than others. In my short eleven years here at Wall Street I remember just a few...Nicholas, Dawna, Heather... and on the other end I also recall Florence; who was still driving herself to church and wearing her high heels only 2 weeks before her passing at 105 years young.

A quote I saw recently: *"Time is like a river. You cannot touch the water twice, because the flow that has passed will never pass again.*

Enjoy every moment of life."

Hear these words of hope and encouragement from Romans 8. *Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. We wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. (If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it.) But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.*

And even recalling words from scripture used in our service last week...words worth repeating: also from Romans 8.

If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or are persecuted, or in danger, or threatened with death? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love.

Like it or not we are all going to die someday. Whether we go because of disease, or suddenly from unexpected health issues, an accident or just old age; our message of hope is the same. We are God's children, members of a royal family, joint heirs of the kingdom of God.

Yes there may be tears on earth, here in the present because we will miss each other; but there must be joy in that certain promise given to us of our eternal life to come.

This scripture from John 3:16 sums it up:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

I mentioned earlier how I used to Disc Jockey; actually for over thirty years; so music has been a big part of my life. I love the lyrics of this Brad Paisley/Dolly Parton song: ***"When I Get to Where I'm Going"***

*When I get where I'm going on the far side of the sky,
The first thing that I'm gonna do is spread my wings and fly.*

*I'm gonna land beside a lion and run my fingers through his mane,
or I might find out what it's like to ride a drop of rain.*

*Yeah, when I get where I'm going there'll be only happy tears.
I will shed the sins and struggles I have carried all these years.*

*And I'll leave my heart wide open. I will love and have no fear.
Yeah, when I get where I'm going, don't cry for me down here.*

*So much pain and so much darkness in this world we stumble through. All
these questions I can't answer. So much work to do.*

*But when I get where I'm going and I see my Maker's face,
I'll stand forever in the light of His amazing grace...*

*Yeah, when I get where I'm going...
Don't cry for me down here... don't cry for me down here...*

Thanks be to God. Amen