

23 May 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

It's hard to sound happy and fun today.

"What are you talking about?" you say. "You *never* do!"

OK, you've got me there.

**"If you're happy and you know it..."**

Occasionally, I've met someone with an 'emotional support dog'. The dog and I exchange a knowing glance, as if to say, "I feel you, brother."

I've noticed that people prefer Ministers who are good at grinning. I'd prefer this too, I imagine, if I didn't see it from the other side.

Popular clergy are successful. Successful clergy are popular. If these were portrayed by a Venn Diagram, the two sets would almost perfectly coincide.

Like waiters who amass big tips, the popular-successful clergy were born with a big capacity for jollification and grinning. They're experts at giving other people uplift. People feel better in their presence. Consequently, these clergy have the biggest Churches and receive the biggest stipends.

They have keen social intelligence, too, and boundless social energy. They have a flair for channeling this energy in a way that calls a whole community into being around them. They sustain this community by inventing meaningful activities, the better to keep people engaged and form bonds with each other. This keeps them from straying. Sometimes they call this 'mission'.

These Ministers are the community's magnet, hub, and engine. Their talent can't be learned. They come by it quite naturally. The best of them wield it with honest intentions and to good effect.

Part of me envies them, but only part. The job wasn't always this way.

**United They Stand**

Methodist clergy used to excel at 'social action' and 'evangelism'. They were drawn to many 'causes', sometimes prudish and reactionary, sometimes socialist and radical. If they didn't move from parish to parish as frequently as John Wesley said they should, some of them might have been fired from their pulpits. Some were. No one could stand them for *too* long.

Usually, though, Methodist congregations ‘got on board’ with their Ministers’ ‘causes’, if not with genuine zeal, then simply to humour them. Many Methodist Ministers were a force too brash to be resisted anyway. Sometimes, the congregation just waited them out until the next one came along.

These clergy could be seen leading protest marches. They put their names on letters to the editor. They petitioned City Hall to close the latest strip joint, tavern, or casino. They agitated for the Temperance Movement and stricter Sabbath Laws, in the days when these were still a ‘thing’, the way they agitate for safe injection sites and indigenous rights today.

Anxious to be seen on the side of ‘righteousness’, they were easily blown by the prevailing winds. They were anti-communist in the 1950s, anti-nuke in the 1970s, anti-apartheid in the 1980s, and they’re anti-racist today.

The United Church of Canada embodies this religious culture. Though they’re prone to a shallow ‘faddism’ – to which I am allergic – I can’t help but admire their daring openness to the world, their readiness for new experience, and their willingness to try just about anything.

‘Causes’ do make one feel important and needed. So, there’s *that*.

### ***Nec Tamen Consumeatur Sed Fumigans (Not burnt up, but Smoking)***

Presbyterian clergy, on the other hand, used to expend their energy in the pulpit. Not so much now, though.

I was taught that every minute of preaching requires an hour of preparation. I’ve found this to be true. It’s devilishly difficult to preach a sermon, never mind do it *well*. What’s more, for every ten people, there are eleven opinions on what ‘good sermon’ means. Preaching gives the preacher the illusion of being listened to, also, and therefore important and needed. So, there’s *that*.

Karl Barth [pronounced ‘*Bart*’] was a great theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Generations of Presbyterian Ministers have loved Barth, even when they’ve quarrelled with him. He was much lauded at Knox College in Toronto, where a former Principal, Walter Bryden, once reigned as Canada’s supreme ‘Barthian’.

When Barth was a young Minister in a village in Switzerland, just as the Great War was finding its feet, he spent most of his working hours at his desk. Nobody complained. No one whispered, “We *pay* him, don’t we? When is going to *do* something for us?” They understood and accepted that he was already doing it.

Along with many hundreds of sermons, he wrote a ground-breaking book at that desk, while puffing his way through many pipefuls of tobacco. A wreath of smoke encircled his head, the closest thing to a halo a Presbyterian Minister will ever wear.

It was said of that book that it “fell like a bombshell on the theologians’ playground.” It launched an intellectual movement, changing the course of religious thinking in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Do you know how rare that is, and how wonderful? His ideas were so *potent* that they had an effect in the so-called ‘real world’ too.

His long sermons were illuminating and truthful, but if Ministers tried to preach the same way today, their congregations would never stand for it, and they’d soon be unemployed. Trust me.

Barth, too, took sides in ‘causes’ from his pulpit. Notoriously, to the chagrin of the wealthy portion of his parish, he backed the local textile workers in their campaign for better working conditions. It earned him the title, ‘The Red Pastor’.

In that sense, he was a ‘*political*’ rather than ‘*emotional* support dog.’ But he was no one’s ‘lap dog’.

### **Prophetic Pathos**

But pulpits are *passé*. Clergy need to have a knack, now, for other ways of gathering and buoying up a crowd. “Make ‘em laugh, make ‘em cry, ‘make ‘em feel religious,” one of my clergy friends would say with a mischievous glint in his eye. “It’s funny because it’s true.”

But the lonelier part of me (we all have a lonely part) recognises that the amassing of a large crowd was never an infallible mark of success anyway. Not in this business. The pastoral work of the Church was never meant to make people ‘happy’, not in the sense of entertaining and amusing them, or giving them something to pass the time on Sundays, if the weather allows.

The Church’s ‘Disneyfication’, sentimentalization, and infantilisation – I’ve detected its progression over the course of my life – may *distract* us from our sorrow, the way two hours in a movie theatre watching *Star Wars 23: The Empire is Really, Really Mad Now*, will take me out of myself for a while.

Sometimes, we need this. I do. But it’s false comfort; not because it doesn’t ‘work’ in the short term, but because it heals nothing in the long term.

The Church's most difficult task – the one it's most tempted to shirk – is this: not to *lie* about the pain of life, not to blind itself to injustice (including its own), nor to deafen its ears to the world's great grief. The Church's first task is to witness these things, to take them in, and to hold them up to God and each other. *It's not to avoid them.*

And then? Then, the Church's task is not to distract us with a carnival that ignores the world's pain – including the pain it inflicts on itself! – but to furnish the world with those tangible resources that make for hope, the ones God has given us in the Gospel.

This is the Gospel announced, not by Microsoft, but by that irritating Rabbi who said, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me," and "What does it profit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the bargain?" and "If you want to save your life, you're going to have to lose it."

So, the first thing to say when someone suffers the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune is not, "You'll be fine, I just know it. Cheer up. Be positive. Smile more, as I do. Fake it till you make it!" The first thing to say is this: "I see that you're suffering. *I see it.* And seeing it, I also feel it, in as much as I can."

What good is that? Sometimes, it's not much good at all. That is true. Don't let's lie about this. Sometimes there's no 'solution'. Sometimes 'witnessing' and 'acknowledging' life's shitty mess is all we can do, and there's nothing more to be done.

But sometimes there *is* a solution – or if it's not a solution, it's a path that leads towards the light. Once it's acknowledged, we may be able to mend what we've broken and clean what we've soiled. Maybe. *But not until we acknowledge it.*

The path to healing has always led though through the 'valley of the shadow', the vale of suffering. Every religious tradition *knows* this. And humans invariably avoid it.

Israel's prophets knew it above all. They knew it in their bones, and they shouted it in a loud voice, like a preacher in a pulpit. But they drew no crowd. No one wanted to hear them.

Yet they were right.

### **A Fresh Serving of Diatribe, with a Side Order of Harangue**

This week, I've thought more about those sad and angry prophets of Israel than I usually do. And I think about them a lot.

Through a concatenation of circumstances that I won't relate here, some terrible truths about our society, and the way we blithely live by them, bore down on me once again this week.

Like a nasty flare up of gout, it has inflicted me often before. It's a flare of anger. Why? Though it's outwardly benevolent to some, our society is viciously mean to others. That's why.

In the few years I've lived in London, I've seen housing prices in our neighbourhood soar beyond the reach of any but the top tiers of our class-based society. This is true across the country.

Make no mistake. Our society is stratified into classes. Even more than 'race' or 'language' or 'culture', *wealth* determines class in Canada. But our 'culture wars' obscure this. Without our noticing it, the class strata have cemented themselves into place. There is less and less mobility up and down the wealth ladder. Wealth flows 'upwards'. *It doesn't 'trickle down'*. And a major repository of that wealth is property. This impoverishes the bottom tiers.

The number of 'For Sale' signs I pass by on my short walk to and from the Church, and the excited 'buzz' of real estate agents and affluent buyers swarming like bees around a fresh blossoming of flowers, has even surpassed the buzz of chain saws eradicating our neighbourhood's beautiful trees.

Whatever happens at the top of the 'wealth pyramid' has a knock-on effect further down. Those who already own a house are awash with more money than they know what to do with. So, they buy another one as investment. Others use the new flush of capital to 'upgrade' from their 'starter home'. But those who could never afford to buy a house in the first place face steeply rising rents.

I know people who cannot afford these rents. If I were moving to London today, I could easily be one of them. If they can't pay their rent, they're evicted. The property owners now hike the rent for this empty apartment, massively, for the next tenant. Now it's more unaffordable for everyone. Who made that rule?

People with an eviction on their record find it nearly impossible ever to rent an apartment again, rather in the way someone with a criminal conviction finds it nearly impossible ever to find a job again. Who made those rules?

So, their next stop is a cheap motel room, though the motel room is more expensive than the expensive apartments they're no longer allowed to rent. So, that can't last. And it doesn't. Homeless now, without even the heirlooms they've cherished, and just a few clothes, they languish in shelters, or sleep on the streets. And people with wealth pass by, and say, "Gosh. Isn't that sad?"

More and more and more, this happens.

Some politicians wring their hands about it. Others shrug their shoulders. They say things like, "The problem is quite complex. Look, first of all, let's be clear: we don't want people who own houses to lose the astronomically inflated value of their property. I mean, come on, let's be reasonable here! But yes, I guess we do need more affordable housing. It's just, you know, so hard to do."

And nothing changes, except it gets worse. It makes me very angry. Then very sad.

I remember when the first food banks opened. They were supposed to be a temporary 'stop gap'. Now they're entrenched institutions with well-heeled CEOs. They're an integral part of our economy because they're a way to get food to poor people without having to raise their wages or benefits. For that might diminish profits on corporations and private income. And raise their taxes too. Who made those rules?

We love food banks. We love giving to them. Of course, we'd never want to use one *ourselves*, would we? But aren't they just great? You know, for 'poor people'?

Oh, and if you can't afford to own a car, and you want to visit a relative in another city, or to keep an important medical appointment there, too bad for you. The Greyhound bus is gone forever. You could try hitchhiking, maybe?

Transportation. Housing. Food. The infrastructure of our country is disintegrating before our eyes. But you may not *see* it if you're well off.

The Church has no power and no design to fix these things. I won't pretend it does. But we have power to *see* reality, if we dare. And to shout it out loud, the way Israel's prophets once did.

### **A Final Plea**

Before I finish, I must pass along a request from Ann Fitchett. She asks if you would save your 'pop can tabs' this summer. In September, she'll round them up and dispatch them to the appropriate charity.

Yours in the faith,  
Andrew