

Sermon Notes – April 15, 2018
“Love with Intention”
Brian Walton

Some of you will be aware of the preacher’s maxim to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Whenever I turned to the newspaper this week one word seemed to come to the forefront, “Humboldt”. With few exceptions “Humboldt” was associated with tragic loss, profound sadness, confusion, fear and the seemingly unanswerable question of ‘why did this happen?’

As a preacher I reflected upon “Humboldt” to determine if there was any lesson, any wisdom, any gospel that could arise out of this tragedy. God opened my eyes to a piece of wisdom. The short version of this wisdom is simply this: “Hug your kid. Hug your grandkid. Hug your spouse. Hug your parent. Hug your friend. Hug your neighbour. Even hug the stranger.” Hug, love, resolve grievances, cherish one another – because the world is totally random and none of us knows what tomorrow, or even the next hour, might bring. I do not believe in a God who is “in charge” of the world or who orders the events of individual lives. It is my experience that much of life is entirely random. Although we make plans – they can be changed in an instant. We should live as if every hug, every conversation, every moment of human connection is the most important one we will ever have.

Of course, we don’t live like that. We live as if every moment is predictable rather than precious, as if time is ‘on our side’ and we can get around to the important things later. If we did otherwise, life would seem so intense. If we lived as if every word we spoke would be our last or that

every goodbye was a finale, life would be filled with overwhelming anxiety. We cannot live with that kind of intensity, but we can live with intentionality. We can be intentional about being present to one another, we can be intentional about expressing our love for one another.

I had a strange encounter years ago while shopping at Safeway. I was waiting in the check out line, not paying much attention to the events around me when I reached the cashier. He was a young man of about 20 to whom I ventured the routine question, "How's it going?" "Not very well," was his reply. Before I could fully rouse myself to a level of consciousness he continued, "Did you see that customer in front of you?" I nodded vaguely. He explained, "I went to high school with that guy and he bullied me every single day. I lived in fear of that guy, I never wanted to see him again." My attention had been awakened and I empathized, "It must be tough seeing him again. I was also bullied at school and I know how difficult that can be."

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber explains that our conversation (show "IT/YOU slide") went from an "I-IT" conversation to an "I-YOU" conversation. I entered the conversation without intention. I merely wanted my groceries rung through and my quip, "How's your day" was a substitute for hello and not a real question. The cashier was an "IT" to me, a person fulfilling a function, not someone I was taking seriously. Surprisingly the cashier took me seriously. He assumed I really wanted to know how things were with him. Showing great vulnerability, he shared his story of surprise and pain with me and I woke up enough to meet him in that place where I could treat him as a "YOU," as a person, like me, worthy of engagement. (move to black slide)

Have you ever treated someone as an “it”? I’m afraid that I have done so not only at the grocery store, but here at church, and even in my home. If I’m busy or distracted and functioning in automatic mode, I lose intentionality and begin to coast in my relationships. Sometimes truly engaging another seems like too much effort or I shut down my emotions fearing that being vulnerable will leave me emotionally wounded.

Some of you may have heard of Brene Brown, a social work professor and researcher. She has spent the last sixteen years researching human connection and concluded that when we are vulnerable with one another relationships flourish, a sense of belonging arises and we live with open-heartedness. She tells of preparing for a lecture that was to be translated through sign language. When she asked the interpreter what the sign for vulnerability was they showed fingers bent over. She asked what this meant and the interpreter explained that it meant “weak at the knees.” Is there any other sign for vulnerability she asked? The interpreter made a second gesture, this time indicating an exposed heart. Yes, she concluded, vulnerability is not about weakness but about open-heartedness.

Humboldt is filled with that kind of vulnerability right now. Circumstances have dictated that everyone is vulnerable - none more so than the grieving parents and the injured players – but everyone is vulnerable including you and I. As a parent, as someone invested in hockey, as a human being we enter that liminal space in which the randomness of life rips away our defenses. In that place of vulnerability, open-heartedness can enter.

Cam Fuller observed in Wednesday's Star-Phoenix (slide of editorial comments), "... what we've seen in the past few days ... (has been) a collective, intuitive, immediate heartfelt effort to make a difference ... (money, moral support, celebrities showing care, hockey teams standing in silence, songs, flowers and lots of hugs.) Fuller writes, "... maybe the answer to the unfairness is to change ourselves." He asks, "How much do we take each other for granted on those days when we allow ourselves to be seduced into thinking it'll last forever?" There it is again, the call to live intentionally. (move to black slide)

So what gets in the way of being intentional, what stops us from speaking the words we want to speak or having the relationships we desire. Brene Brown suggest that it is our fear of being vulnerable with one another. She calls it "armoring up". Let's listen to her. (Brene Brown clip – go to black after clip) ... "our capacity for open-heartedness is never greater than our capacity to be broken hearted." She was not talking about a hockey disaster when she wrote those words. She was talking about everyday life and our willingness to be vulnerable with one another.

There was a time when Bunny Pfeifer and I were the support people, for the ALS society. I remember the times when a new member joined the group after diagnosis and how they spoke about their suffering. Often that suffering was not the result of their physical discomfort or the realization of a limited life span. Often their suffering arose because the people they thought would support them, their best friend, their work mate, even close relatives seemed to abandon them when they needed them the most. I had a chance to meet some of those people – the ones who did the abandoning. They weren't bad people. They weren't lacking in care. They

reported that they didn't visit their newly diagnosed friends because they didn't know what to say, because they felt so bad, because they were worried they would cry. They were afraid to be vulnerable. The patients wanted connection – they could accept their friend's tears, they could endure their friend's awkwardness – what they couldn't understand was being abandoned. If their friends could only bear the sadness and awkwardness it would have led to a much needed open-heartedness. These opportunities occur every day in our kitchens, in our workplaces, in the church lounge. Our willingness to be vulnerable with one another, as that grocery clerk was with me, leads to open-heartedness. If we live with such intentionality then we will live in the everyday moments of human connection with our hearts are wide open.

At the outset I suggested that preachers hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. I've been preaching from the newspaper today, but Jesus offered up this lesson centuries ago. In the midst of his own impending death he invited his friends to a meal. In an act of total vulnerability, he removed his outer garment, picked up a basin, and began to wash their feet. Have you ever washed someone's feet, or had your feet washed by another? It is a moment of vulnerability. From that position Jesus rose and said, "Where I am going, you cannot come,' but I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. If you do this, everyone will know that you are my disciple."

Might we risk vulnerability, to live open-hearted, and thereby be known as a disciple of the living Christ. Amen.