

## **“Bringing our Gifts”**

### **A sermon preached by Ruth Wilson on January 7, 2018**

A few years before he became principal of Queen’s, in 1874 George Munro Grant a Presbyterian minister preached a sermon in Montreal entitled A Church for Canada—Is it possible? This was just a few years after Confederation, and many years before his great grandson Michael Ignatieff was born. Grant considered the various gifts that each of the denominations might bring: Methodism bringing passion and evangelical zeal. Presbyterianism bringing love of learning and order; Congregationalism bringing local autonomy and initiative; Anglicans bring beauty of liturgical language and practice. He even wondered if the Catholics might join, and we might imagine Catholicism bringing tradition and universalism; Orthodoxy bringing tradition, symbolic and musical liturgies, icons, and Eastern experience. And we could broaden the vision to include the whole Church worldwide embracing diverse peoples, beliefs and practices.

Today I am going to talk a bit about history, and then move on to consider two of our lectionary readings, from Isaiah and the Matthew. Today is about looking back, being in the present, and looking forward.

Chalmers United Church (named after a leader of the Free Church of Scotland), began meeting in 1847 at City Hall. This building dates to 1890. The First Congregational Church joined in 1922 in anticipation of Union in 1925. Later in the service a communion plate from the congregation will be brought forward along with our other gifts. The Presbyterian origins of Chalmers, and its location have ensured a long-standing association with Queen’s University.

The SSUC building dates to 1852, founded as a Methodist congregation over 200 years ago in 1811. Its location and tradition included a contingent of members of the downtown business community.

At the time of Church Union in 1925, almost all the Methodist, Congregationalists, local union churches joined, but not all the Presbyterians did. Samuel Dwight Chown, a son of SSUC, was at the time of Union the General Secretary of the Methodist Church in Canada. An able administrator and thoughtful churchman, he was an obvious choice to be first moderator of the United Church. His concern for the unity of the church however led him to direct the first General Council that a single ballot should be case for the new moderator, Dr. George Pidgeon, a Presbyterian. He gave up power for the sake of unity. There is a plaque at SSUC in this honour which reads, Christian, Patriot, Evangelist, Administrator, Servant of God, well done! I take comfort from it when my own administrative tasks seem daunting.

Twenty years ago, Tri-church summer services included First Baptist, and I know there are some former members of that congregation here. SSUC more recently has become an Affirming congregation, actively welcoming those of all sexual orientations. This morning our benediction comes from (Old South Church, Boston), another rainbow church, the church of Mother Goose located on the finish line of the Boston marathon. SSUC has embraced the concept of The Spire, a community accessible hub. And our tripartite mission is symbolized in the three coloured braid which will be offered later in the service.

I am a member of SSUC, but have deep associations with Chalmers. 40 years ago, my father Roy Wilson was inducted as the minister here; my mother Lois Wilson was briefly an associate minister here before becoming the first woman moderator of the United Church. Mom and I spend some time over the holidays reflecting on the lectionary scripture for this Sunday, and what it might mean for our two congregations. You will hear some echoes of her thoughts to follow; the exegesis of Isaiah is not mine! On Epiphany Sunday the gifts of the Magi are celebrating, and bringing our gifts today is our note of joy. But Isaiah has more to tell us.

Prophets such as Isaiah were poets and visionaries, articulating both grief and hope. It is not healthy to pretend that things are ok, because then there will be no grieving and no serious criticism. The grieving of Israel under Isaiah was never resignation, but it was the beginning of a recognition that things had to change, permitting a new reality to emerge. We so often pretend things are ok—in a relationship, or in the hospital room, or in the church!! And as long as that pretense is kept alive, there will be no serious grieving or new future. So congregations are urged to gather around memories that embrace discontinuity and a genuine break with the past, while bringing with them the richest of memories for future lives together.

The contemporary Christian church is enculturated to the ethos of materialism. Our power to believe or act is diminished when we lose our identity through abandonment of our faith tradition. A faith community rooted in energizing memories and summoned to a radical curiosity is a threat to the culture. The church has no more pressing issue than the reappropriation of its memory in its full power and authenticity. It was the task of prophets such as Isaiah to bring the claims of tradition and his current situation into interface. Prophets critiqued their culture, but also energized people by the promise of another time and situation toward which persons and communities could move. Their words were about both the grieving for a culture that was, and new hope for the future. That fits what we are faced with—the grieving for what WAS in the two congregations but now a hope for a future together.

Isaiah is a poet engaging in future phantasy. It is the vocation of the church to proposed alternative futures for itself and for the community. We need to cultivate the wit, energy and courage to think freely about alternative imagined futures. This requires us to not yet finally give up on the promises God has spoken through our rich tradition.

We fear “endings.” We consider them a failure. But once the ending of something is acknowledged ( deathbed/ marriage/collapse of institution etc) then new life can come. In Isaiah 6:1 it is at the point of the death of the so-called king that the prophet sees the real King high and lifted up. The embrace of endings permits new beginnings. The insight of Biblical faith is the awareness that only struggle and anguish lead to new life, only grieving leads to joy, and only embraced endings permit new beginnings, Isaiah and the prophets (and Jesus afterward) were full of anguish and grieving out of which new life came. Think of the cross and resurrection.

How hard it is to express a future that no one thinks imaginable, a future of peace, equity, and love. We need to move back into the deepest memories of our community and activate these symbols of hope. The memory of our community begins in God’s word to the darkness of chaos (Let there be Light) to barren Sarah (who bears a child) to the oppressed Hebrew slaves, freed by Moses, to the cross and then resurrection of Jesus. The symbols and the speech of God are first about an alternative future. We are called to be a community of hope. It trusts Gods promises. Hope is what the community must do because the community is invited to be in God’s pilgrimage. And just as Israel grieved over endings so we are invited to hope in God’s promises. The Christian movement is described in staggering simplicity in Luke 7:22( Blind receive sight; lame walk; deaf hear etc.)

On Epiphany Sunday, the Magi who travelled from the East brought the new insight that gospel is also for the Gentiles—epiphany today means new ideas, new insights. The Magi crossed boundaries and borders, following a light, not knowing what was in store for them. So too our two congregations are poised for a new beginning. For some of us this has taken far too long; for others it is happening far too fast. But we are on the move.

Our call— is not to despair, but to remember our past, the prophesy, the promise; to cross boundaries, to keep our eye on the star, to discern the brighter vision, and to bring our gifts to shape the future. Amen, may it be so.