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discovering what's on the inside



Your kids who are into texting and instant messaging think you're a cave dweller because you still use email. Fortunately there are other ways you can join the 21st century.

You don't use email either? Oh dear. Then you'd better read this.

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WE STOOD THEIR MESMERIZED as the glass blower did his work. Heating the molten glass to 1,100 degrees Celsius, so hot we could feel its intensity some 20 feet away, using a long pole, human breath, paddles, tweezers and shears this artisan created a thing of beauty out of molten lava. Participating in this ancient practice which dates back to 1st Century Syria, the master went to work and within minutes, that which could only be described as a glob of sand, limestone, soda ash and potash was transformed into a vase or pitcher or statuette of exquisite wonderment.

This too must have been what the prophet Jeremiah experienced as he watched the potter at work behind the wheel. As

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his hands shaped and moulded the wet clay, there appeared a vessel of usefulness, an art form of beauty. The artisan could see beyond the red-hot lava, beyond that earthen clay to the potential each object held. Yet only through his eyes, his breathe, his hands did this new creation appear.

It is no surprise then that God would send Jeremiah to a potter to catch a vision of what could be. The analogy of the potter and the clay symbolized the relationship between God and Israel. He writes in the 6th century BCE in a time when Israel was in turmoil, and he offers to them a word of hope. Just as the potter can mould and shape the clay, God can remold and reshape the nation if there is a willingness. And even if all is not as it should be and the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potters hand, he can rework it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Verses six to eight speak of this remolding, this remaking process of breaking down and plucking up until the inner beauty is revealed but verses nine and ten speak of the hardened clay, no longer able to be manipulated or moulded, the cold glass which now would shatter if those same creative tools were applied to it.

Just as the artisan needs the clay, the clay needs to be pliable, or as one

Commentator puts it . . . the clay is far from passive for it is the result of this constant interchange between the fingers of the potter and the properties of the clay.

This was an analogy for a nation which

went unheeded and in 587 BCE Israel was defeated in battle and became part of the Babylonian Empire.

Yet this is an analogy for life as well. One of the things I like to do with couples planning to be married is to have one explain to the other what he or she sees in that person. Describe to me the person you love, I ask. Tell him or her what makes them so special to you?

After some awkward silence, the words begin to flow, words which can sound like sweet music, words from your best friend, your life companion, very personal words about you.

These are usually the words we would never use to describe ourselves. Humility wouldn't allow us. Or perhaps it is that we do not feel as lovable, as caring, as sensitive, as perfect as our loved one pointed out.

Or perhaps it is that he or she had discovered that which is on the inside which makes you who you are, that which is only visible through the eyes of an artist, the eyes of a loved one, the eyes of God. These are the eyes that can see the beauty and potential from deep within, the vase in the molten glass, the bowl in the hunk of clay, the wonder that is even in us.

I have mentioned to you before about that wonderful poster of a boy with his sling shot and the words captioned below . . .

I know I'm special cause God don't make no junk.

Although the grammar may leave a little to be desired, the message is vital. My hope,

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as we begin a new year within our church school, if nothing else, the children will leave this place Sunday after Sunday feeling special, important and loved. You have a role to play in making that happen through example and praise, through teaching and listening, through caring and being.

Now, this too is my wish for those of you who do not get to go downstairs for art and story but remain up here and listen to me. However the reality is we adults tend to be less pliable than the children, more rigid, dare I say more set in our ways. Perhaps we have become hardened by life and no longer feel special. Perhaps there is no bend, no give, no willingness to be moulded and mended by the Creator's hand for things are just fine the way they are you very much! I think of an elder who said to his new young minister, I don't care what you do on Sunday mornings as long as you don't mess with the hymns, the prayers and the traditional sermon. And it's nice to have children in church as long as you can keep them quiet! Perhaps some re-working is required here as well.

Dave read those rather jarring words of Jesus from Luke's Gospel on the conditions of discipleship . . . whoever does not hate his family cannot be my disciple. Whoever is not willing to carry the cross cannot follow me. Well, on face value, this would leave most of us out. How, as people who love our families, do we justify these words of Jesus?

First, we need to understand the intent of Jesus words. Professor Perry Biddle Jr. writes, 'to hate' in Jesus' use of the term

does not mean what it means for us today. The Semitic mind expressed ideas in the extremes, of light and darkness, truth and falsehood, love and hate. To say one prefers this over that, the ancient mind would say, I like this but I hate that.

Perhaps a modern example that some of us have faced is the moving away of grown children. This action is not because they hate their parents, well as least not always, but because they must move on to embrace education, vocation or some other calling. Jesus is saying the same about discipleship. We must move on, take it as our own and not simply that which is passed down to us. He presses this argument with two short parables . . . a person is not going to build a tower without first estimating the costs and a king is not going to wage war without first understanding what that means? To be disciples, followers of Jesus in his day or our own, requires something of us . . . perhaps even more now than it did in the generations of our parents or grandparents. We need to recognize that call, that belief, that faith which is deep within us.

Whereas with previous generations, Canada was considered a Christian society where 80% of families attended church, the Lord's Prayer was prayed in schools and the name of Jesus was to be praised. Today, 80% of families don't go to church, prayer has been removed from school and the name of Jesus for many has been reduced to a swear word. Now, my point is not, at this at this time to bemoan these changes, for they are

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what they are, but simply to point out that being a Christian involves a little more cross bearing than it did a generation or two ago. As the youth chooses to leave home to move ahead, as the landowner chooses to build a tower, as the king contemplates waging war, we choose what we accept to believe, to place faith in and then and only then can those choices and this faith be lived in our world.

Perhaps this choice is the same choice that Jeremiah gave the people of Israel. He was inviting the nation to reclaim that spark of the divine which was implanted in them from the very the beginning, to find that bowl within the earthen clay, that vase within the molten glass, that exquisite beauty which is part of each and every one of us.

Perhaps it is buried so deep we no longer can recognize it, but deep down we know we are special cause God don't make no junk. Perhaps we have become so hardened that we need more time at the wheel, more time in the kiln, more time in prayer, more time in fellowship to be remolded and remade. Opportunities are available in his church to allow that to happen as we gather downstairs following this service for lunch in the gym.

The words of the chorus, written in 1926 by Presbyterian minister Daniel Iverson, speak of this process:

*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
Melt me, mould me, fill me, use me.
Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.*

We all need a make over from time to time, some re-moulding, re-shaping lest we become too hardened to care or too fragile to change.

This morning is a significant time within the life of any church, for, in many ways September brings in a New Year as much as January. It is a time when we look at how we spend our time, set our priorities, and discover that which is there inside of each and every one of us waiting, wishing, wanting to come out.

Would you pray for the children in our Sunday School? That is a ministry. Would you drive some to church or perhaps even to a doctor's appointment?

That is a ministry. Would you read scripture in church, take part in the Inn From The Cold, join the UCW or help start a Men's Club? Those are ministries.

Would you share your faith with our children in the church school, explore your own faith development through the adult study groups or push your faith a little under such fine leadership of Dr. Art Wolfgarth or Rev. Vicki Fulcher? That is a ministry. Will you seek out that spark of the divine within you so that together we might share God's light?

The church is a very human institution. It is filled with saints and sinners. Some times we make good decisions for the faith and the community, and sometimes we make poor ones. But at its heart is not the cathedral like structure or majestic organ or long-winded preacher. At its heart are men and women, children and youth willing to own

that spark of divine from within and live it in the world. It all starts and ends with you.

So may that be the way that our church, Bridge Street United, is known within this place, this community and beyond and may those sparks, which are in each one of us, ignite into a flame and a warm glow for God. Thanks be to God.

Biblical References

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Luke 14:25-33

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