

FURROWS LIE OPEN

Pentecost 8, Year A: Matthew 14:13-21

Prologue

It is with great sadness that we received the news that the Rev. George Mayer, pastor of our congregation from 1987 to 1993, died this past Tuesday, July 29, 2014, at his home in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Most of you knew of his cancer diagnosis of seven years and of the optimistic and courageous outlook he held throughout his illness, consistent with the whole of his life. In a telephone conversation on Wednesday with George's wife, Sandra, she told me that George died as he had lived – full of faith and deeply connected to those around him. She told me that she could feel nothing but gratitude for the blessing of their 47 years together.

Although the Mayers have lived in Massachusetts for many years now, they have never been distant from our congregation. Whenever they were in Ontario, they visited at worship; whenever we had special celebrations, they were our invited guests. Pastor George's legacy in our congregation and in the wider community of Kitchener-Waterloo is considerable: he was instrumental in establishing Waterloo Koinonia Community Homes, Inc., he organized the first interfaith group in K-W, and he led our congregation in co-sponsoring with St. James, St. Jacobs a refugee family from Central America. His pastorate was transformational for our congregation, taking us from being a mission congregation to being a congregation in mission for others.

Although no memorial service is planned for the Mayers' many friends in K-W, our service this morning will honour his memory. In my Pastoral Letter notifying our congregation of George's death, I invited any who wished to share their memories to do so. Many people wrote, and one of our folks dictated his reflections to me over the phone. Here are the things we said about our pastor and friend. Our comments are our sermon this morning. I can think of no finer tribute to Pastor George than saying thanks in our own words. Essentially, they appear in the order in which they were received.

Tributes

from James Brown

George and I worked closely through the years of transition from his pastorate to mine. Through those several meetings, we became friends, both having shared a deep love for this wonderful congregation and a sincere respect for one another's gifts. As you may know, George and Sandra have always been welcome at Christ; they have remained good friends of the parish, and we relished their all-too-infrequent visits.

May George now rest in the arms of the merciful Saviour he proclaimed with such clarity and gentleness.

from Brice Balmer

I knew George before and after his pastorate. His struggle with cancer and his dying are a wonderful witness to faith and trust in God - plus good friendships and family. Thanks!

from Tim Hegedus

When I was doing my MA in Religion and Culture back in the late 80s I stayed at their home one night every week.

He was a lovely human being and a loving, compassionate pastor.

May his memory be for a blessing.

from Dawn Haussler (née Stahle)

My grandpa, Wilfred Stahle, was great friends with Sandra's father. They were fishing buddies. We fondly remember George's pastoral care at the time of my grandma Ada's passing. He came over to the house and helped the family write out thank you cards. His kindness will never be forgotten.

from Oz Cole-Arnal

I came to know George chiefly through a men's group that met monthly for lunch at Paul and Kathy Bosch's place on Albert and Bricker. Over our regular meetings I experienced him as a comrade in solidarity --- in his commitment to justice, interfaith dialogue, as well as a profound sense of humor and self-awareness. Our bi-annual hikes on the Bruce Trail served to intensify the bonding of our group. To this day I'm content that I broke the silence around his application to teach Homiletics at the seminary and why it was turned down. Indeed, though I pleaded that an interview should have been forthcoming, my appeal proved stillborn. Thankfully I was able to get across that he did, in fact, have a supportive voice within our faculty. In a denomination not known for either courage or vision, dear brother you embodied both. You will be missed.

from Bishop Michael Pryse

George was, indeed, a very fine pastor. I remember his fine work in Malvern and also the excellent ministry he had at Christ.

I am grateful to have known him.

from Kevin Boehm

Pastor George touched me in a way not as a pastor but as a friend. When thinking about my time with him, what came to mind for me were two things: basketball and bear hugs. He always had time to shoot some hoops in the parking lot at the church, and whenever I would see him he would give a hug that was always so strong and reassuring. My basketball skills were not great, but the conversation was.

from Debbie Lou (Creighton) Ludolph

'clarity and gentleness' thank you for those words. In my little encounters with George (mostly at Paul and Kathy Bosch's home) those words fit my experience perfectly.

from Jane Wahl

...is it too late to offer a possible wee edit to your notice in the bulletin for Sunday? After the statement "...he proclaimed with such clarity and gentleness" I would add "joy" ('such clarity, gentleness and joy'). I say this because just after he accepted the Call to Christ, he was in Synod Office and came into my office and asked what I felt our congregation needed. My reply was "Laughter in the halls, and the proclamation of the joy of the Lord." He delivered both in spades!

from Karen McRae

I keep thinking about how George lived his life. He celebrated his family, his work with the church, and I think personally pursued many goals that were important to him.

From my first days at Christ Lutheran he was welcoming to me and my family. He certainly wore different hats when he would dress up as clown and encourage the child in all of us. He loved Sandy, his children and grandchildren. I think of how he treated the seniors in the congregation by encouraging them to meet and form long-lasting friendships. I think he saw the good in everyone, and was never hesitant to broach the subject of whether or not they had considered joining the ministry.

He will be greatly missed. I think this is demonstrated by the fact that he left Christ Lutheran so many years ago but still the congregation feels deeply for him.

from Ed Otterbein

George bought the big posters that we still use for our outdoor Christmas crèche. He got Bill Williams to cut out wood as a mount, and I pasted them on. Later, after Bill and his wife moved to Hanover, George asked me to set up the figures outside the church for Christmas. I took all day and did the best I could, but the very next day they were all knocked down, and everything had to be rebuilt. I questioned the wisdom of setting everything up again, but George said, "Let's put it up again and we'll pray for those who vandalized it." That really touched me.

It so happened that a number of the men of the congregation were all out of work at the same time. George suggested we start meeting each week for lunch as a kind of support group. The group got close, but we weren't expecting that we would be a support for him when he was struggling with his own issues. We were!

Last year, we were at a 25th Anniversary Dinner for Habitat for Humanity. At the dinner, George was remembered as one of the founders of the local group. Knowing that he was struggling with cancer, we had a special prayer for him at the dinner. I didn't realize that he had been with Habitat when it first organized.

When Eliakim Shaanika and his family came to Waterloo from Namibia for Eliakim to study at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, George was instrumental in settling them in an apartment near the university. When classes began, Eliakim realized that the English he had learned from the German missionaries in Namibia wasn't adequate for his academic work. George spent hours working with Eliakim to help him with translation and to improve his English.

from Keith Myra

My first contact with George was through my involvement on the Call Committee. Along with other members of the committee, I was immediately impressed by his passion, enthusiasm and seemingly boundless energy, all of which were highly evident during his pastorate at Christ, Waterloo.

During his time here, I served for several years in the roles of congregational Treasurer, and then Chair of Council. I was also a close friend, and along with Ron Puley, we enjoyed cycling with George to Conestoga almost every morning during the years he spent in Waterloo, as well as longer weekend rides. From my perspective, his legacy to the congregation includes the following:

It was through George's leadership that the congregation became involved in outreach and ministry to/with the wider community. George encouraged outside groups to make use of our facilities, and many did. The Brain Tumor Support Group started meeting during his time here. Serge Leclerc, a former convict who turned his life around, attended worship regularly during George's pastorate and was very active in Prison Fellowship Canada and, as a result, our congregation and some of our members had some affiliation with this organization.

Along with a few others from Waterloo, George went to Toronto to hear a speaker (likely Millard Fuller) from Habitat for Humanity, and was so inspired that he invited those who were interested to come to our church for an initial meeting (there were likely a number of other Habitat meetings held in our building). This group eventually became the Habitat for Humanity Waterloo. George was an active volunteer on several Habitat builds, and served as chaplain for a week or two at the build in Bridgeport in which former US President Jimmy Carter participated.

George introduced a new leadership style to our congregation. We had been used to a style where almost all of the direction and decisions were made by the pastor. Although this was needed during our early years as a fledgling congregation, now that we were twenty years old and firmly established, George felt that strong lay leadership was important, actively soliciting input from others, and comfortable encouraging others and in delegating decisions to various lay leaders.

Consistent with what we would expect of any pastor, George cared strongly for people and personal relationships. A few examples: Lutheran Adult Fellowship aka the LAF Group; the importance he placed on healing ministry with regularly-scheduled healing services; the importance he placed on prayer, including gathering people for prayer meetings for Ruth Gaiser; his love for the youth of the congregation – seeing him at youth fund-raising events, washing cars in his blue clerical shirt and clerical collar; having an annual Christmas party which he and Sandy hosted for Council members.

He had an open mind and encouraged our congregation to try new things - e.g. introducing guitar and liturgical dance in Sunday worship, and incorporating his personal experiences with the Taizé Community. We had mid-week worship during the summer months and, with Paul Bosch's assistance, periodically rearranged the altar, chairs, font, and ambo in the Sanctuary. While not every change and experiment was popular with everyone, many were.

from Arvella Steinberg (on behalf of the Meier, Steinberg, and Siegel families)

George truly laughed and cried with our family through the best of times and the worst of times. Our sympathy and love goes out to Sandra and the family.

Postscript

Our Gospel, this morning, tells the story of Jesus, overcome with personal grief over the beheading of John the Baptist and undoubtedly dealing with the premonition that John's end foreshadowed his own end when, the crowds search him out in his deserted place lifting him temporarily from his personal anguish. He moves from being consumed by fear and foreboding to showing compassion for his disciples and curing the sick.

Toward evening, the disciples realize that all these people, thousands of them, need something to eat, and they are in, essentially, a desert. The disciples want Jesus to send them away into the villages where they can buy food. Jesus doesn't recognize the emergency, and tells the disciples to provide them with something to eat. They tell Jesus that they have nothing, only five loaves of bread and two fish – as good as nothing for the thousands of hungry men, women, and children. Jesus commands the disciples to bring him the five loaves and two fish; he blesses them, and then gives them to the disciples to distribute. "All ate and were filled," Matthew tells us; in fact there were 12 baskets full of leftovers.

Sometimes we are distracted by the miracle Jesus did without recognizing that in feeding the 5,000 Jesus provides us with a sign and a vision of the kingdom of God in which all are fed; in which there is abundance, not scarcity.

This sign is for us, for the church and for our mission: it is a sign of the radical justice that Jesus' disciples are called not only to proclaim, but to realize in a world in which injustice, yes, even in our beloved Canada, rules. Injustice rules because we allow it to. George, in the new directions he showed our congregation, nudged us in the direction of doing something to counter the radical injustice that is everywhere. Grete Pruefer, may she rest in peace, observed that George was good at starting things, planting seeds, the seeds of gospel justice and the seeds of gospel love. The furrows lie open, our Hymn of the Day reminds us. God in Christ Jesus has plowed the field, and left it for us to, along with George, plant the seeds, make new beginnings, and then nurture and protect what grows up. Doing nothing is not an option in the life of discipleship. We honour George's memory by being good gardeners and good farmers in growing the gospel and, ourselves, becoming signs of the kingdom of God.