

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

October 28, 2018

Umbilical Living

You know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. – 2 Corinthians 9:6-8,11-12

In our culture it is easy to lose sight of how much we have we have been given. We are encouraged to think that everything we have, we earned, and we deserve it. But that is absolute bunk. I want everyone here to think of one thing which they didn't earn. What are they? --- Life, love, the air we breath --- We could name a thousand more ways in which we are not self-made people. Instead we live constantly in a state of grace, for whether we acknowledge it or not, life is a gift, freely given.

Each of us carries with us every day of our lives a reminder of this state of grace in which we live. It is known as the bellybutton, the navel or the umbilicus. The navel is a scar that serves absolutely no purpose other than to remind us that once, we received all of our nourishment from the cord which was once attached there. Once we received everything as a gift. We are no longer attached to an umbilical cord, but every day we receive so much. And that bellybutton serves to remind us of that. It is the visible reminder that life is a gift, unearned and free.

Some native artists have a beautiful way of depicting this. When they draw a person or an animal they show it connected to the sun, the earth or to other animals by what looks basically like an umbilical cord.

So I want to suggest to you this morning that navel gazing is a spiritual activity; contemplating our navels can help us live with a constant sense of our giftedness. It is this living with a sense of the gift of life which I want to call umbilical living. Because living with a sense of the basic giftedness of all life has consequences. Gratitude shifts the way we see the world



Figure 1 - Medicine Bear with Spiritual Helpers - by Norval Morrisseau

and requires us to live differently than we otherwise would.

But how can you respond to obligations which can never be repaid - like to our parents, or to the earth, or to God? There is only one legitimate way to respond to a sense of grace, and that is with generosity. Umbilical living is therefore generous living. It is seeing ourselves as stewards of our possessions rather than owners. It is learning to hold our lives and goods loosely rather than tightly.

Umbilical living is as if we treat everything we have and are as if it were a wallet found on the street, something that has come into our hands only accidentally. Should we keep it for ourselves or try to ask what a better use of it might be? Umbilical living means always asking how can I use these gifts of money, time, talents, life in such a way as to best serve the common good?

Last weekend, our former Interim Minister Peter Kugba-Nyande was speaking at the Stewardship Conference we had here. He talked about how strong the sense of community is in Sierra Leone, where he was raised. The word for it there is Ujamaa (I'm not sure I am pronouncing it right?) and Peter said that he had to be careful about going home because when he goes home now, he is considered a rich man, and all of his distant relations will come to him, expecting help, help which he would be happy to provide, if he could manage it all! In its most extreme version, they will hand him their children, and say "this is your nephew. Now he is your responsibility." The sense of community is so strong that people will turn over the children they think will have a better life with him, trusting that because they are all tied by umbilical cords of community, he will care for them as if they were his own, which in many ways they are. Because if we really took umbilical living seriously, we would see all children as our children, and all people as our brothers and sisters, and all creatures as our cousins.

Paul's second letter to the Corinthians (who lived in what is now Greece) was written at the time when there was a great famine in Palestine, which is after all, halfway across the Mediterranean. The Roman historian Josephus confirms that the famine was the result of a series of bad harvests and the province of Judea was particularly hurt by it. So what happened? Paul urges the believers in Greece and Macedonia to set aside a little each week for famine relief, for their brothers and sisters across the sea. He reminds them of the generous life of Jesus, who "though

he was rich (being the Son of God and all), yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” not only asks the Corinthian Christians to give generously, but says that we should not give “reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.” The Greek word that is translated as “cheerful” is the word *hilaros*, which is also the root for our word “hilarious.” So it may not be enough to be a cheerful giver — Paul wants them (and us) to give hilariously, joyfully, uproariously!

Paul goes on to say that: “The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” I don’t think that this sowing and reaping all happen in the same way. Being a part of community, Paul is saying, being tied umbilically to others, involves sharing what we have, whether it is time, talents or money, because we can do more together than we can do separately. A community in which people don’t share generously is not much of a community. A strong community is better for everyone in it. So Paul says “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your goodness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God.” We tend to think of giving as giving up, when in fact, our giving (and our taxes) contribute in many ways to a healthier, stronger, more rewarding community life, which improves the quality of life for everybody. Giving is rewarded. Even though the church people in Greece and Macedonia were by no means rich, they gave what they can and they sent it to the mother church in Jerusalem to be distributed appropriately. That is an ancient example of Ujamma, and ancient example of umbilical living.

And yet, we don’t live in a culture which emphasizes Ujamma and umbilical living. We live in a culture that constantly bombards us with advertising. Even if we don’t need or want the specific products being advertised, a constant underlying message is continually reinforced: “you don’t have enough! You Don’t Have Enough! YOU DON’T HAVE ENOUGH!” Even if you do have enough, when you hear that message enough times, you start to wonder whether you’re missing something, if the message that you don’t have enough really means that you AREN’T enough, that at some very deep level, you are inadequate and a failure. In

such a society, no matter how much we have, it never seems to be enough. Trapped in such a rat race, it can be incredibly liberating, joyful and cheering to simply say: “I do have enough. I DO have enough! I DO HAVE ENOUGH!! I have enough to be able to share.” The philosopher Jean Paul Sartre once said: “All which I abandon, all which I give, I enjoy in a higher manner through the fact that I give it away.” As Ebenezer Scrooge discovered in Charles Dicken’s classic *Christmas Carol*, it is a lot more enjoyable to be generous than it is to be stingy. Holding onto something makes us closed and narrow and isolated. Sharing connects us with others, bonding us to others and to the whole community.

I remember once visiting a man who was living with cancer. He was past thinking of being cured. He just wanted to live as long and as comfortably as possible. One time, when I arrived to visit, his wife and an adult daughter were visiting him. It was just before Thanksgiving, and at one point in the conversation his daughter, who is developmentally delayed, was talking about how she was looking forward to a grand Thanksgiving Dinner. And this man, who is quite sick, reminded her that the point of Thanksgiving is not just to have a big meal, but to remind ourselves of all that we have to be grateful for. So I asked him what he is grateful for. And he made quite a list all the blessings in his life: the love of a good woman, a daughter who rubs cream on his feet, two little girls who are grateful for his place in their lives, a medical system that is prolonging his life and keeping him comfortable without bankrupting him, a comfortable bed, a wheelchair that fits, clothes on his back, food on his table, a furnace to keep him warm, a faith that helps him face the future without fear, ... Here was a many who had lots of reasons to worry, lots of struggles and reasons to be anxious, and he is putting us all to shame with his gratitude list. It is worth remembering that even in the most challenging struggles of life, especially in the most challenging struggles of life, there is quite a list of things to be grateful for, a lot of umbilical cords through which we are being nurtured, and a lot of ways in which we can nurture those around us. Thanks be to God! Amen!