

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

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The Good News of the Belly Button

Colossians 3:12-21 – *Paul instructs Christians in the city of Colossae about the implications of Christian faith for their life in congregations and in families. While some of his assumptions about gender roles are clearly influenced by his culture, there are some basic principles here that are still worth our serious attention.*

In his message, our minister offers an informed but personal interpretation of a passage from the Bible. This interpretation is intended to assist, not replace, our own creative engagement with the Bible as a means through which God may be communicating with us.

This morning we acknowledge a tradition that arises out of the fifth commandment, the commandment to honour your father and mother. Mother's Day is a day to honour and thank our mothers, to think about our relationships with them, to forgive them for their failings, and to recommit ourselves to honouring them in our lives.

In one way, Mother's Day is a bit of a motherhood issue – no controversy – pretty simple and straightforward. It is hard to disagree with the importance of mothers in our lives. But in another way Mother's Day is a profound challenge to the culture we live in, which is so focused on personal freedom and individual liberty that it has made our families fragile and our communities even more so. When we think primarily of our own fulfillment, our own needs and our own satisfaction, then we become isolated individuals for whom family or community are very much secondary considerations. It becomes easy to walk away, and almost impossible to feel we belong anywhere. We become profoundly lonely, isolated, insecure and defensive. Mother's Day is a reminder that before anything else, we are connected to one other person.

In the last few weeks I have noticed that my 17 month old granddaughter is completely confident about only one body part: her belly button. If you ask her where her eyes are, she will point to her nose. If you ask about her mouth, she will point to her nose. And if you ask her about her nose she will also point to her nose. She seems to think that any facial features are summed up in her nose. But if you ask her where her belly button is, she will confidently hike up her shirt and proudly show you the physical reminder that each of us began connected, utterly dependent on another person. She is pretty smart, Sadie. Because the belly button is the primal body part. The belly button is the physical reminder that we are not primarily isolated individuals, but we all begin as parts of a family. Mother's Day, I want to propose today, is a day for navel gazing!

Most cultural and spiritual traditions emphasize our responsibilities to elders, parents, children and other community members. The Biblical tradition reminds us that as members of families, we have obligations that are not matters of personal choice, but fundamental human responsibilities that we neglect only at great cost. In the Ten Commandments our care for the

previous generation is linked to our own well-being and security, "*Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land...*" (Exodus 20:12) Proverbs 23:22 tells us to respect the generation that has gone before: "*Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old.*" Proverbs 28:24 goes further and warns against any economic ill treatment: "*Anyone who robs father or mother ... is partner to a thug.*" Ezekiel 22:7 extends the warning to "*orphans and widows.*" The Newer Testament picks up the same themes and in Matthew reminds us again to "*honor your father and your mother.*" And the passage from Colossians that we heard this morning makes it clear that parents have responsibilities to their children and children to their parents. And all have the responsibility to forgive, love and encourage one another. In Christian community, the roles of husbands and wives, fathers and children are set within a context of mutual support in a wider community of faith.

In fact, because we are all God's children, our responsibilities are not limited to those of our own families. We have obligations to the larger family of faith and to the still larger family of all humanity, especially the widow, orphan and sojourner, the least, the last and the lost.

The constant theme of Scripture is that the well-being of our parents and the next generation is spiritually connected to our own. We are bound together in what has been called a "intergenerational covenant." It is a covenant because it is a sacred responsibility. It is intergenerational because it involves parents caring for their children in growing years, and those children then caring for their parents when they are elderly. Even those who don't have biological children of their own are part of this intergenerational covenant, because we all have responsibilities for the children in our community. "It takes a whole village to raise a child," the old African saying goes, and we are all part of such a village.

The theologian Jurgen Moltmann says that human life stands or falls on the preservation of this intergenerational covenant. When the covenant is ignored it puts our societies and even our species in serious jeopardy. It involves not just our care for the individuals who are our parents and our children. It involves the way we shape our communities and the way we relate to the rest of creation. We both inherit the earth from our parents and borrow it from our children and we have responsibilities to both. The first responsibility is that of respect, attention and sometimes material support for our own parents. Paul's words are a good guide: "we are to put on garments of love, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. We are to bear with one another, forgive one another, to teach and correct each other in wisdom, and to be grateful."

Beyond that we have responsibilities to shape a community in which all elders are honoured. Income supports and seniors- residences are important ways we honour our elders. But the intergenerational covenant is violated when seniors are abandoned to loneliness and poverty, when caregivers abuse them, and when "old" is spoken as an insult. Or when, because those who care for them have to work several jobs to make ends meet, they are put at risk of infection, as has happened in so many seniors' homes recently.

We also honour our parents by taking our responsibilities to future generations seriously, by caring not only for the children we may personally have, but for all children. In Christian community, when we have a child baptism, we all make commitments to that child, and we all

become godparents to that child. Whether you are married or single, childless or with an extended family of your own, the children of this community are your children too. And because all the children of God are related to each other, because we are all part of one global village, and it takes a whole village to raise a child, all the children of the earth are your children. You are part of the intergenerational covenant.

A famous research scientist was once asked by a reporter what had made him such a great scientist. He responded that he thought it came from an incident that happened when he was a toddler. He had been trying to get himself some milk, when the bottle slipped from his fingers and it fell, spilling milk all over the floor. When his mother saw the mess, she didn't yell, but said, "Robert, you've made a big mess! But there is no point in crying over spilt milk. Would you like to get down and play in the milk for a few minutes before we clean it up?" So he did. And then she asked if he wanted to use the sponge, a towel or a mop to clean it up. He chose the sponge, and together they wiped up the spilled milk. And then she said, "What we have here is a failed experiment in how to effectively carry a big milk bottle with two small hands. Why don't we take the bottle into the back yard, fill it with water and see if you can discover a way to carry it without dropping it?" So they did, and after several tries, he discovered that if he grasped the bottle in a certain way, he could carry it without dropping it. This renowned scientist said that he learned in that episode that "he didn't have to be afraid to make mistakes. Instead he learned that mistakes were opportunities for learning something new, which is, after all, what scientific experiments are all about." That, he said, was the key to his success as a scientist. [retold by Jack Canfield, "Remember, We're Raising Children, Not Flowers!," *A 2nd Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul*, p. 86]

We honour the intergenerational covenant when we find ways to raise and teach children that honour them as precious gifts of God. We honour that covenant as well when we shape communities in which child poverty is effectively addressed, in which effective supports are offered to parents who lack the skills, wisdom or commitment to look after their children properly, in which no child is considered expendable or disposable, when we look out for children in the neighbourhood, and treat all children as precious gifts of God.

We violate that covenant when we live as if the current generation is the only one that matters. The Iroquois First Nation tried to make every decision in light of its impact on coming seven generations, but in our culture, we tend to think only as far ahead as the next business cycle or the next election. The future is discounted at the rate of inflation. The consumption of non-renewable resources, the accumulation of public debt, the production of toxic and nuclear wastes, the erosion of topsoil, are all liabilities that we pass on to our children.

As part of God's faith family and God's community of life, we are part of that intergenerational covenant. We receive it as a gift from our parents, and we embrace it in fulfilling our responsibilities to our parents, our children and to future generations, and to those with whom we share this good earth. Let us treat all with whom we are bound in the community of life and the community of generations with the respect and consideration due to God's precious children. Let us, as Paul writes, clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, letting the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. **Amen!**