

Osler Mennonite Church – February 22, 2015

Healing Friends

Mark 2:1-12 by Patty Friesen (Feb.22/15)

In the opening scenes of the movie *The Bourne Identity*, super spy Jason Bourne is fished unconscious out of the Mediterranean Sea onto a Greek boat. “I don’t remember who I am,” are his first words when he awakens and the quest for his memory drives the plot of the whole thrilling Bourne trilogy in which his enemies tell him who he is. In *Still Mine*, a movie of an elderly New Brunswick farming couple, the daughter asks the father if he has had his wife’s memory checked at the doctor. “I forgot,” he sheepishly replies. The movie, Still Mine, and the popular book, Still Alice, and a book on dementia called, I’m Still Here, remind us by their titles that despite our memory loss, we are still who we are in our souls and in the memory of God and our loved ones. These truths still keep us who we are even when we cannot remember who we are!

Jeanne Murray Walker writes of her mother’s dementia: Now I can say that as my mother journeyed more deeply into the land of Alzheimer’s, she was always still a person. I discovered it by paying attention to Mother herself. She changed, of course. She entered new stages the way we do all our lives. But fundamentally she was the same person. She continued to be governed much of the time by optimism and faith. Eventually she lost her language. But she was still a person, still herself, still my mother. (The Geography of Memory, p. 147)

Mark’s gospel reading begins today with Jesus back in Capernaum where he had previously healed the man with the unclean spirit and Peter’s mother in law. The people

heard that he had come home and so many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door. Four friends came carrying their friend on a stretcher – one on each corner and they are so determined that they literally dig through the clay-tiled roof and lower him through to Jesus. That must have been a scene – dust and racket and suddenly a man lowered on a mat in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith – the faith of the friends, he said to the paralytic – your sins are forgiven. There ensued a discussion on who can forgive sins but God alone and Jesus responded, “which is easier to say your sins are forgiven or get up, take your mat and walk? But that you may know the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins and heal – get up take your mat and go home.” He got up, took his man and walked out of the house in full view of them all.

This is a powerful healing story because it involves the faith of the four friends. We would all be fortunate in life to have four friends – one in each corner who would bear us in love in our illnesses. This story is fitting to our journeys with dementia in our friends, parents and grandparents. We will have to be the faith-filled bearers of love with them even if there is no cure and no physical healing to this particular disease. The healing begins with us as caregivers and faith communities.

The beginning point of dementia is always our value as people created and loved by God and forgiven by God. That never changes, despite our change in memory, abilities, personality and even faith. It doesn't matter what happens on our side of things, “nothing separates us from the love of God.” Dementia cannot separate us from God even though it threatens to separate us from ourselves, and our loved ones. It is difficult to watch the changes that come with this disease, even for those who work with it daily at the Mennonite Nursing Home. We always have to be calm and patient and try to figure

out what a person is trying to say even if it doesn't always make sense. We as family and caregivers are the ones who have the most to learn by this disease. We have to enter their reality which may be years back and when they are looking for their dead parents, spouses or friends, we have to learn not to constantly correct them but affirm how important those people were to them.

The other Sunday, a resident didn't want to come to church because she was waiting for the bus. Rather than telling her there was no bus that comes to the Mennonite Nursing Home on a Sunday morning, I asked her where the bus was going. She said, Plum Coulee. I said, "Oh, that sounds like a lovely place. Who lives there?" She said, "my mother and father." "Oh, I said, you must miss them very much." What this resident says sounds like complete nonsense but what is she really saying when she says she's taking the bus to see her dead parents? She is expressing a longing for what she remembers right? She doesn't remember her husband and children but she remembers her parents and the comfort that came from living in her childhood home in Plum Coulee. She is longing for home, for that comfort and familiarity – and sometimes I think the longing for home may be a longing for heaven as well.

Jesus heals the paralytic because of the faith of the friends and caregivers. We are created in relationship to our families, friends and community and these relationships give us our ongoing meaning and value even when we can't remember them. These relationships may be strained in the midst of illness but they dare not break. Not all is lost with dementia. It is a journey from one state of relationship to another and presents new opportunities for communicating.

The way of relating can be hidden from us but the challenge is for us to grow as people who do not always need to get something out of a relationship or conversation. We visit people with dementia because we love them and remember them, not for what they can give us. We must visit one another – spend time together and offer friendship, respite, relief, listening and loving presence to both sufferers and caregivers. We must give people with dementia the benefit of the doubt and not allow difficult behaviour to prevent us from seeing the face of Jesus in these struggling ones. As we do these things, we come to see God more clearly and act more faithfully. Every time we hold someone's hand and remind them we love them, even in the midst of deep forgetting, our souls collide with Jesus' promise, "Lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the age" (Living in the Memory of God, John Swinton, p. 286).

The lessons of dementia will be the hardest of our lives. We have to learn extreme patience. We have to learn to be comfortable with silence or complete nonsense without constantly trying to correct our loved ones. We have to grow as family and community members. It becomes our responsibility to do the remembering for our loved ones and to never forget whom they were despite the dementia that may last for decades. Some family members create photo books or small history books that residents pour over in attempt to remember their lives. One of my elders in assisted living who doesn't have dementia has started writing a journal just in case she gets it, saying, "I don't want to forget about my life."

In the book *Still Alice*, Alice functions through her day with the help of her Blackberry reminding her of her life. With dementia, we need to be each other's Blackberry. If society's most macho hero, Jason Bourne can have dementia and have his

enemies remind him who he is, how much more can we remind our family and friends who they are.

The dementia unit is my favourite at the Mennonite Nursing Home for the unexpected humour that resides there. The other day at devotions, I noted that the hymn had five flats, an elder responded, “Well, that’s more than my car’s got!” And later when we sang, Standing on the Promises, he said, “Well, that’s better than sitting on the premises.” Besides humour, the dementia unit at the Mennonite Nursing Home is holy ground. It sometimes feels like the other place, but when the elders begin to sing or pray or recite scripture, there is something preserved in the recesses of mind and spirit that comes forth. Elders who cannot remember where their room is or what their wife’s name is, pray aloud with such profound power, it settles the other restless residents around them and leaves staff in tears. I have no other explanation than the presence of God is nearer to us on the East Wing, that dementia creates a thin place where in the midst of the confusion and vulnerability, God’s love and spirit bursts through.

We need these visions of God’s presence in the midst of dementia because otherwise it can feel like a complete wasteland of loss and confusion and grief. We need to know God is with us in the midst of it or there is no hope in God at all. God says in Isaiah, “Does a woman forget her baby at the breast or fail to cherish the child of her womb? Yet even if these forget, I will never forget you” (Isaiah 49:14). Our memories might fail but God has perfect memory. Let us trust in him to care for us in the midst of our struggles.

Let’s pray...