

Getting to Know Jesus, the Christ

July 20, 2014

More Reflections on the Beatitudes

**Ps 86:11-17 and Matthew 5:8-11
(624, 625, 637, 655)**

I spent this past week back in Ontario
with three friends who are dying
much faster than I think I am.

Ken is my age – 3 months younger, actually.
We've known each other our teens
through PYPS, then various national church committees and projects.
He was my best man when Jill and I got married.
In his professional career, he was an urban planner,
with a doctorate in the discipline from Grenoble,
and worked for the governments of Canada, Manitoba, and Ontario.
When he left the civil service, he bought the Second Cup franchise
at the corner of Church and Wellesley in Toronto.

Ken is gay.

He was diagnosed as HIV-positive very early in the rise of that disease
and went on the chemical cocktails they devised.
Those early treatments are having horrible long-term side effects
and that's primarily what's wearing Ken's body away.
It's a long list of ailments and failures in his system.

David is 82.

We met in the early 1970s.

David was a top executive with the Royal Bank of Canada –
Vice President of Public Affairs and Special Advisor to the President.

We were arguing bank loans to South Africa and Chile.

I was on the ecumenical Taskforce on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility.

The basic idea was to divest from those companies
that did business with the apartheid regime or the military junta,
but we wanted to be in dialogue with them prior to taking that action.

David had been born and raised in South Africa,
so knew the situation well.

His position, very well-articulated and argued,
was that the Royal Bank could be of more help by remaining there.

We agreed to disagree, but develop a great respect for each other,
then became very close friends after David moved to Toronto
and bought a house just a block away from Glebe, where I was minister.

David was a heavy smoker.

His arteries and veins are clogged.

He just had a stent put into a major artery inside his hear this week.

He kidneys have failed, so he on overnight dialysis 3X a week.

His abdomen is herniated beyond repair.

The retirement of consulting, travelling, and sailing
has not materialized.

John is 88 next month.

We met when he came to preach the anniversary service at Glebe
a few months after I started there in 1978.

He had been a student minister there in the early 1960s.

His career in ministry took him from a small town in Northern Michigan,
to a maximum-security prison in the same area – as chaplain, not inmate.

Then to Perth, ON, to our national office in Toronto
working on evangelism and social justice,

then to Sarnia, where he had a parish and worked in the prison,

then to retirement in Norland, up in the Haliburton Highlands.

His wife of over 50 years, Bona, died quickly of lung cancer earlier this year.

John is no longer well enough to continue to live

in the beautiful stone house they moved into 18 years ago.

He has heart problems, various forms of cancer in various parts of his body,
and serious muscular and bone failures.

He is now in Continuing Care in Ross Memorial Hospital in Lindsay
waiting for a unit in a seniors' residence in Fenelon Falls.

In many ways, John and Bona were surrogate parents to me
after my parents died – Mom in 1970 and Dad in 1980.

John asked me and I agreed to be his literary executor –
sorting through and disposing appropriately of his papers and books.

A significant selection of the papers, sermons, and annotated books
will go to the National Archives of our denomination.

Many of the books will be donated to various libraries and people.

So, I began sorting through all of this stuff

in preparation for the listing and sale of the house this fall.

And there is a lot of stuff.

He kept everything by way of papers and bought books voraciously.

I'd estimate his library contains close to 5,000 books.

I filled 10 garbage bags and 12 large boxes of paper to be thrown out
in just 3 days of sorting.

So, there was lots this past week to be angry and depressed about –
focusing on how death is happening to these dear friends.

But I also had in my consciousness our text this morning from the Beatitudes.
The Spirit was creating this provocative dialogue
between the reality of death and the reality of blessing.

Because that's how Jesus treats the reality of God's loving presence.
It is a blessing, no matter what is happening to you.
It is within you, as a constant source of strength.
It is within you, as a way of seeing life that leads to you being a blessing.
Granted, that blessing is a treasure in an earthen vessel,
but it is a treasured blessing none the less.
We have all been given the grace to be blessings, no matter what,
and the energy to choose that way of being.

I gradually saw this in my dying friends this week.
Ken, on his very limited income now,
buys various things to beautify his social housing unit.
He is still planning and executing projects to make his space more comfortable.
David, confined more than he'd like to his house now,
works on his collection of photographs,
refining them, colouring them, creating all sorts of fascinating effects in them.
And he sends them to family and friends to enjoy with him.
I just got several of them this morning when I checked my e-mail.
John is talking about a new calling from God,
now that Bona has died and the house is being sold.
He wants to write on the atonement,
the Christian doctrine of reconciliation with God,
in ways that he thinks the church has not heard clearly enough.

These friends, whose bodies are breaking down,
who all go through bouts of pain, anger, and fear as this happens,
have all found ways to experience God's blessing and pass it on.
Simple, ordinary ways, perhaps.
but powerful and profound, probably because of their simplicity.

I suspect a lot of Jesus' listeners to that Sermon on the Mount
were caught up in similar forms of the human condition,
just like we are.
Into that world, and ours, comes this startling affirmation and invitation –
"You are blessed so you can be a blessing."