

Zion, Pembroke 140th Anniversary – November 26, 2023

The Lord be with you! Thank you for inviting me to be here today. And thank you for the tremendous contribution you have made – and are currently making - to the work of the wider church through your generous sharing of people, prayer, money and many other resources through 140 years. You have been - and continue to be - leaders and valued partners in the life of our synod and I would be remiss if my birthday greetings to you did not include a clearly articulated word of thanks.

Today is a birthday party. And birthday celebrations – whether for individuals or for churches - are very important events! They are days for gifts and special candles ... for celebration and wish-making ... days to take stock of who we are and what it is that we're supposed to be all about. That's why we mark them with special observances and rituals. Indeed, for most of us, birthdays provide us with our very first experience of rite (r-i-t-e) and ritual!

Think about it! The party, the games, the cake and ice cream ... candles, presents and all of the prescribed photographs. And what a thrilling ritual it can be – particularly for young children. One eager two year old I know, received a beautifully wrapped package, bound with richly coloured ribbons. His mom (the tireless tutor of please and thank-you's) set in, "And what do you say Alex?" "OPEN IT!" he shouted back ... surprised that anyone could be so dim as to have anything else in mind. And of course, all of us laughed, recognizing at once, the honesty and excited wonder of early childhood.

Early faith, of course, is similar. It's an experience of gifts that new believers share with refreshing candour and simplicity. It's a season for celebrating existence rather than achievement. All is new ... all is fresh ... everything is charged with that almost unbearable excitement of being "the first time." We want to tear open the gifts and let the paper and ribbons fly ... we eat four pieces of cake and don't care if we get a belly ache. It's a celebration of the moment and all we want to do is "open it!"

But it doesn't stay that way forever, does it? Things change as we get older. Adolescent birthdays, for instance, are somewhat less exuberant. Sweet sixteen is still a party time ... but the candles on

this cake illumine some difficult questions. "What am I going to do when I grow up? What kind of person will I be? Where is my life taking me ... or where am I taking my life?"

Likewise, an adolescent faith is also pre-occupied with internal agendas. "What are we going to do ... what are we going to be?" We begin to feel the weight of responsibility and experience gifts as things to work with and not only for playing with. We try out different postures ... experiment with different styles. We scramble and squirm through a gut-wrenching, but necessary process of finding out who we are and what we are to be about.

Then come the so-called mid-life birthdays ... the ones that scare us with the prospect of passing over the proverbial hill! But wherever, "over the hill" might be ... (it has an interesting way of changing location as you get older, doesn't it!) ... in time, if we keep pressing on – we find that we actually come full circle to the place where birthdays are again something to be celebrated! Family members put special notices in the Leader; we get certificates from Johnny Yakabuskie and Cheryl Gallant - big parties are held and onlookers come to marvel at the raw strength of survival.

Old age does, of course, bring its own unique challenges, challenges that echo Ezekiel's cry, "Can these bones live? Can my hope be restored and my isolation ended?" And yet, at the same time, these special birthdays can help us recognize the value of things beyond achievement, for a "well worn faith" is also a less anxious faith that has relinquished its expectation of cheap grace. It's a mature faith, that in "going over the hill" has experienced some of the crosses which stand atop that hill ... and because of that it is able to move into a fuller experience of the resurrection.

The Scriptures tell us that while the "young see visions", the "elders dream dreams!" It's a recognition – an affirmation- of the vast spectrum of who we are; a spectrum of gifts which is represented, more or less, in every Christian congregation that has ever been since that first chaotic, mixed-up Pentecost day; a spectrum of gifts that is certainly well represented within this 140 year old community which bears the name of Zion!

And what a treasure that is! What a marvel! More and more we are coming to live in a society where we are segregated whether that be according to age, race, gender or economic class. Think

about it! Society is being cut into increasingly thinner and thinner slices where more and more we end up being with or watching people who, for the most part, look, sound and think exactly the same way we do.

The church, however, is, and always has been a community that challenges that pattern. The Christian community as described within the New Testament is characterized by some amazing combinations of people; Jews, Samaritans and Romans, rich and poor; religious and non-religious. From the very beginning the church has been about as diverse and mixed up a community of people as you can imagine! And that, in spite of the pious things we say – is not always an easy situation for us to live with.

Susan Briehl, a former director of Holden Village in Washington State, tells the story of how two daughters of a friend prepared for the impending birth of a third child. The youngest of the two seemed to be adapting to the idea of an expanded family quite well, but the eldest seemed to be focussed on this coming birth in an excessive way. She was always asking questions like, “Where will the new baby sleep ... where will the new baby sit when we eat supper where will the new baby go in the car?” Finally, the mother sat down with her daughter and asked her if anything was bothering her about this new baby. “Are you worried about something special?” And it was then, finally that the real question came out. The little girl said, “Well whenever we go out, you hold my hand and daddy holds Sonja’s hand. So when the new baby comes, whose hand won’t get held?”

There’s a sense in which this describes our natural response to the kingdom’s radical inclusiveness. Part of us feels that if God’s embrace is defined too widely - if it were to include both young and old; black and the white, men and women, gay and straight, rich and the poor; we might somehow end up with nobody holding our hand.

In today’s Gospel Jesus defines our partnership in his reign by the radically challenging measure of how we have related to those who are least within the human family, the lost, the lonely, and the last. It’s not a new message. In the Gospels, again and again, Jesus describes a kingdom wherein people who are in the darkness of separateness and aloneness and are subsequently called out of isolation and into the light of a new community. And similarly, we who are successors of

those first Christian communities, are called to become a visible sign of that same kingdom, in all its' wonderful and rich diversity.

In a tradition that dates to the year 690, the Ise Jingu shrine in Japan is completely dismantled and rebuilt with new materials every 20 years as an expression of the Shinto religion's belief in the cycle of death and renewal of nature. The new temple isn't considered a replica, instead it has been re-created, and that distinction is essential. For in Shinto belief, a temple must not be a monument but must live and die and continually be re-born in order for it to remain pure.

I'm glad were not Shintos! But this practice is, I think, quite descriptive of who we are as Christians! Living and dying. Dying and rising. Continually being reborn. Always under construction! Friends, the same God whose Spirit called this congregation into being 140 years ago is still challenging and equipping you to more generously share the Gospel of love and reconciliation that has been entrusted to you. And in this special birthday year, that same spirit is still challenging and equipping you to more fully become God's birthday wish for the world - a world God loves to a capacity that is beyond our ability to fully comprehend or imagine. And to that I say thanks be to God – and happy birthday to you all! AMEN