

John Docherty, 2013-09-08

A stone as witness to covenant

This is a “welcoming Sunday”. It’s part of a “passages” tradition that we’re experimenting with here at MFM. The “passages” Sundays are intended to welcome those who are new to our fellowship (usually in the Fall, with the start of the new academic year), and to bid a fond farewell to those who are moving on from MFM (usually in the Spring or early Summer, with the end of the academic year).

It’s an attempt on our part to acknowledge those who have been, or who are about to be, a part of our community life. On one level, I suppose these Sundays could be seen simply as a nice, polite gesture – the kind of thing you do because, well, that’s the kind of thing you do.

But, on another level, these Sundays give us a chance to pause for a moment to remind ourselves why we’re here. Something of a touchstone to measure how far we’ve come together, and perhaps to anticipate how far we still have to go. Or, at the very least, it gives us an opportunity to reflect a bit on who we *are*, and why that matters as we move forward.

Because, with these kinds of passages, with some people leaving and some people joining our circle, we change. The MFM of 2013 – 2014 will not be the MFM of 2012-2013. The MFM of 2012 wasn’t the MFM of 1980 or 1990.

Yes, some of the actors stay the same. Some of us have been around for the last 30-plus years, or the last 20, or the last 10 years, but a good proportion of us haven’t been around that long. Even those who have, aren’t really the same people they were when they started attending MFM. Our life experiences mold us, and we adapt, and morph into who we are today.

We all probably see and experience God differently too. I don’t mean that we all each have our own unique experience of God, though that’s absolutely true. I mean that we all probably see and experience God differently today than we did 10 years ago, or last year, or perhaps even last week. Not that God is different, of course, or that our experience of God is necessarily dramatically different as we get older, but each new experience helps shape the way we experience the next.

And some of those experiences with God, and with each other, will become touchstones in our lives – moments that remind us that God is there, and moments that put human flesh on the invisible frame of our covenant with God.

The Scriptures that were read all have “stones” as a central part of their imagery. The only one that really uses the idea of a “touchstone” is the Joshua passage. It speaks of a “large stone” that is set up under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord. In putting the stone in place, Joshua says “See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.”

Now, I don’t know how you react to this idea of a stone eavesdropping on your conversations with God, but I find it a little unsettling. In the context of Joshua’s challenge to the people of Israel, it risks coming off as something that descends into tribal superstition – here is a silent, inanimate witness to sacred and powerful bonds between a people and their god. The stone, then, has a life of its own; a presence; a role in the community.

This reading of the text is all the more uncomfortable because we have other texts that explicitly prohibit this kind of practice : Deut. 16:21-22 says, “You shall not plant any tree as a sacred pole beside the altar that you make for the LORD your God; nor shall you set up a stone pillar—things that the LORD your God hates.”

And yet, here we have this leader of the people, this successor to Moses, doing just that : setting up a stone under a tree in the sanctuary of the Lord.

I’m not a biblical scholar, and I’m not a theologian, so take what I’m about to say for what it’s worth, but I think this passage shows clearly that the people of Israel at this stage of their journey are still trying to sort out what it means to follow this God who has led them from slavery to possession of a land of milk and honey.

They’re still trying to get it right. They’re still trying to shake the old practices while adopting a new way of being. They’ve arrived in Canaan, but they’re still on an internal journey. And let’s not forget that while they’re on this spiritual journey together, and though we tend to speak in terms of “the people of Israel” as if they’re a single unit, or an army of clones, they’re not all on the same wavelength. They, like us, are individuals, each trying to make sense of it all, and trying to figure out how they fit into the picture.

It's not at all clear, either, that they are all ready to truly enter into this covenant with this particular God. So, one gets the sense that Joshua is *sure* that the spiritual journey is far from complete and this is why he insists on their declaring their desire to follow God three times, before then setting up a lasting memorial to remind the people of their covenant.

I suppose the idea is that when the people look on this stone, they will be confronted with a permanent, though mute, reminder. As they enter the sanctuary area, here is this block staring back at them, silently searching their hearts and demanding that they take stock of how they have been faithful, or unfaithful, to their covenant. Don't forget, Joshua has told them that "...it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us ..."

Can you allow yourself to go there for a moment? If this stone here were the stone that Joshua had used, though I assume his was much bigger, can you imagine what it would be like to be in the presence of such a thing? To just let your imagination run for a while and contemplate that this stone was actually, physically touched by the vibrations in the air as the people of Israel heard the promises of God, and as they voiced their covenant. That those vibrations, some 3300 years ago, caused this rock to vibrate also, and that those vibrations have been somehow captured in this stone.

Would that give you reason to pause and wonder?

It's a little bit like when we say "if these walls could only talk ..." These walls that have been witness to things private, personal, hidden. These walls that have been touched by the vibrations of life.

In *this* building, these walls of brick and mortar would have much to say. They've been affected by the vibrations of things going on in this space for a long time. Because God has been at work here over the last 70 years or so.

The original building, there on the east side, was, I believe, a typical Montreal row house. The layout is pretty standard, and I suspect it was probably built in the early part of the last century.

But during the Second World War, when this neighbourhood was Montreal's Jewish quarter, and the setting for Mordechai Richler's books, the house was bought by the community and converted into a Jewish Peretz school. If you go out

to the sidewalk, just by the garden, you'll find a cornerstone with the date 1942, and a Hebrew letter or two.

In the years following the war, many of the kids in this school were refugees from Europe, and the community was growing. In 1947, they expanded the school and built this gym, and the floors above it. Every Fall, about this time, the now relocated school troops the younger kids through the old neighbourhood, and they drop by to show them where their teachers went to kindergarten, etc.

If these walls could talk they would reverberate with the laughter and giggling of those kids, I'm sure. But, I suspect, they might also echo the quiet sobbing of parents and teachers during the war, or eruptions of fury or despair as word drifted back about family trapped back in Germany, and Poland, and Hungary, and elsewhere.

How was God at work in this building, I wonder, as the Holocaust was raging in Europe? To what extent was this building also a refuge from the anti-semitism that was all too present right here in Montreal? If these walls could talk, what would be their witness of the many simple gestures of comfort and support at a time of unimaginable horror?

I'm sure when the teachers who were children themselves in this school look on this building, they are carried back to their own childhood surrounded by these walls, and the bricks speak to them.

By the early 60s, the Jewish community was moving further west on the Island, to Outremont, Cote-St-Luc, etc. This neighbourhood of Jewish refugees was becoming a neighbourhood of Ukrainian immigrants, among others, and the Ukrainian community bought the school, converting it into a Ukrainian community centre.

If these walls could talk, what would they echo from *those* years? Fortunately, I'm sure there would still be laughter and giggling children. Would the hand of God be seen in this attempt to provide *their* children with a safe and stimulating space where their heritage could be valued and their identity protected?

How would these walls interpret the creation of a credit union on the second floor where RIVO and Dialogue Duluth now occupy offices? How would they speak of these poor immigrants pooling their resources to help each other?

By the early 70s, that community too was migrating elsewhere, a little farther east of here, and in 1973 the Mennonite community bought this building and established the House of Friendship, the Maison de l'amitié.

When I say "Mennonite community" I mean the broader Mennonite community of Canada. The House of Friendship began as a joint project of Mennonite Central Committee, the Mennonite Conference of Ontario and Québec (now MCEC), and (I believe) the Mennonite Mission Board, as well as some local Mennos.

If these walls could talk, what would they say of *those* years? It's been 40 years now that this building has housed us. Both MA and MFM. We're not one and the same, but we share this space and affect each other in sometimes subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways.

The original vocation of MA was as a daycare, and the young adults who cared for the kids were MCCers who lived on the 3rd floor and worshipped at MFM. The families who sent their kids to the daycare were mostly new immigrant and refugee families, so a refugee programme was developed. Out of the refugee programme came partnership with a United Church mission, involvement in the creation of an emergency housing project for refugee claimants, and involvement in the creation of a network of therapists for traumatised refugees.

And, largely as a result of that broad scope of work, alongside MFM there developed a Spanish-speaking fellowship, and an Amharic-speaking fellowship.

In recent years, the programming has shifted somewhat and taken on more direct activities related to peacemaking and concern for the environment.

What would these walls say of all of that? Have we been faithful to our covenant with God? Will the people who have been involved in the various programmes some day look on this building and say to themselves "*there* is a place where God was honoured, and life was valued."

I hope so.

Of course, the building itself is only a silent witness to what goes on inside. It's not the principal actor. The principal actors are the people who made this a place of refuge and healing over the years.

And, so far as MFM goes, the principal actors are you, and me. And that's why it

matters who we are and how we continue to strive to be faithful to our covenant with God.

We are, according to Peter, the “living stones” that are to be taken and built into a spiritual house. A collection of dense, sometimes hard-headed blocks that can be fashioned into something beautiful.

If these walls could talk they would speak of the full range of the human condition. They could tell you of things they’ve seen in this circle that would inspire you, and things that would leave you in despair. They would speak of moments of joy and celebration, moments of loss and regret, moments of pain and hurt, and moments of healing and comfort.

Like Joshua and the people of Israel, we’re not quite there yet. We’re still trying to shake old habits while trying to adopt a new way of being.

I hope that as we start a new season, and as new faces join the circle, that there will be occasional “touchstone” moments for you.

Moments that stand out from the normal routine of things and provide you with a reminder of why you’re here.

Moments that draw us all further into our relationship with God and each other.

Moments that can feed our hope that we are making some progress in our covenant with God. Hope that as we look around this circle at each other we won’t see mute condemnations of our failures, like the stone placed by Joshua as something of a warning, but rather living stones whose own hopes and aspirations are inextricably linked with ours.

I’ve been using the term “touchstone” throughout this message. It’s a common usage of the word to mean a memorial, or a reminder. A stone, or some other object, to be touched from time to time to ground us once again in whatever we feel is central to our identity. It can be anything : a pebble, a small cross, a medicine pouch, a photograph, or anything else of significance to you.

The proper, original meaning, though, is of a stone used to test the quality of precious metals. A piece of gold, for example, would be drawn across the face of the touchstone, maybe a slab of smooth, inert, slate, then certain chemicals would be applied to observe the reaction and measure the gold content.

A touchstone in that sense, then, isn't so much a reminder as a measurement of quality.

And in that line of thinking, all of our interactions are "touchstones" to some degree. Each time we hurt or help each other we provide an opportunity for testing the quality of our faithfulness to our covenant with God.

For what it's worth, this particular stone comes from the Schmucker's farm, and, though it may seem trivial in some ways, I hope our corn roast this afternoon, at that same farm, can serve as a touchstone for some of us. A chance to simply mingle as friends and enjoy an afternoon out in the country, away from the busyness of city life. A chance to gain some perspective, have some intimate conversations over a cob of corn and a burger, and measure the quality of our progress as a community.

And you're all welcome.