

DEDICATION OF LIFE

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Haggai 1: 15b-2:9 - I will fill this house with splendour
Luke 20: 27-38 - God of the living

Today I want to talk about dedicating our lives because we have three kinds of dedication that we're including in our service. This is the Sunday for dedicating the pledges which have been gathered over the last month and turned in last week. It's also the Sunday for dedicating our new and renewed organ. And it's also Remembrance Sunday, when we honour those who dedicated their lives in that ultimate way during the wars. So it seemed to me a time for us to stop and think about what "dedication" means, and what it means for us in our lives.

Although today's two scripture passages are not very related to each other, each picks up one of the important truths about dedication. One of these truths is that when we dedicate ourselves to something, that something doesn't have to be something permanent, nor does our dedication make it permanent. Jesus has a conversation with the Sadducees--I said it was the Pharisees but I was wrong and I'm sorry. It's the Sadducees, and there's a significant distinction because they were arguing over resurrection at the time. The Sadducees didn't agree with the Pharisees' idea of resurrection. They use the example of one of the highest expressions of dedication in our lives--marriage, the dedication of our life to another. And then there is that bizarre illustration of the seven brothers. (I really didn't need to provide an introduction; I should have known that By [Reesor] would be unable to resist introducing that particular passage.) But then Jesus very seriously answers with a description of resurrection life--life beyond this life, life that is transformed so utterly that marriage isn't even a part of life any more.

I found myself using that passage once when meeting with a young couple who were about to be married. It was actually a disappointing thing that I was having to point out to them. I encourage couples to customize their vows if they like to, and the vows this couple chose had that expression "until death do us part." The poor bride was thinking, "Wait a minute; I love this guy too much to be with him only until I die or he dies. I want to be with him forever, in eternity." And so I shared with her this passage that said marriage exists only until death. The resurrection life--the life beyond death--is so utterly transformed that things which are our familiar expressions of dedication aren't even permanent in that sense. We were talking much more in the spirit of marriage, not literally. And I don't think Jesus, either, was talking in a literally dogmatic way. His point was that our dedication is not diminished. Rather, it is transformed into something utterly different, utterly beyond, and that doesn't diminish our dedication because the dedication is in God's hands and God transforms life. Of life beyond this life, Paul says we live this life in a physical body but we are raised a spiritual body, and that means it's something utterly different, an utterly different form of presence.

And then we have the story from Haggai, a book that is only about a page and a half long. Haggai was a prophet during the time immediately following the Exile. People had gone through this fifty-year experience of having their whole way of life destroyed, including the temple itself which had been built by King Solomon back in the days of Israel's glory. The temple had been destroyed and the people had been taken into exile. The Babylonians were cruel, and wanted to demolish the people's sense of identity as a people. But when the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians, a much more compassionate Cyrus came to power and enabled and encouraged the people to return to their homeland and rebuild their lives. The people had returned, had got their farms going, and had been getting their houses built and all that sort of thing. But things weren't going well; it was an awful struggle. Then along came Haggai who said "You know something? You're putting all this work into getting your farms working and your houses built, but take a look at the temple. It's still a pile of rubble. Your life isn't going to start working the way you want it to until you rebuild the temple." And that's really the whole point of the Book of Haggai--just rebuild the temple, rebuild the temple, they must get the temple rebuilt or nothing they would do for themselves would make any difference. So Haggai was calling them to dedicate themselves to something beyond themselves, beyond their own home, their own self-interest. And that's the second insight about dedication--just dedicating our lives to something beyond ourselves, to something of the holy, the sacred, the transcendent.

So we have two insights about dedication. First, what we dedicate ourselves to doesn't become permanent. It transforms in the future into something perhaps even more glorious. And second, to dedicate ourselves is to dedicate ourselves to something truly beyond ourselves.

We'll be dedicating our pledges this morning. We've had quite an experience this last year getting stewardship moving in a more thorough and intentional way. It has been a very risky time because in a sense it throws up the question that asks if we as a congregation are dedicated enough to the life of this congregation to contribute, to commit what it takes financially to allow this congregation to keep on living into its future, into the future that has been envisioned, into the future that we will envision as we begin doing even more intentional visioning during our visioning workshop at the end of November. That is a call to dedication. A pledge is an expression of the dedication of our lives, in this case to the church and its mission, to something far beyond ourselves. And we offer that without any apology because it's an opportunity to dedicate our lives. There's a kind of meaning in life, a fulfillment in life, that comes by giving ourselves, devoting ourselves, to something beyond ourselves. So we'll be dedicating our pledges.

We'll also be dedicating our organ. The dedication of this organ is an exciting occasion, something for which we've been preparing and saving and working for a long time. There are many people who have donated to the organ, who have been memorialized, who have worked on this organ. We have made some acknowledgement of these people, and there will be other times to acknowledge and name them. We're not naming them in our dedication today--there would be hundreds of names--because there's a danger that we might end up glorifying ourselves, patting ourselves on the back. The many people who have donated toward and worked in the rebuilding of this organ have done so for something beyond themselves. So today we dedicate the organ to the glory

of God, and in some cases to the memory and the honour of those individuals who were memorialized by the giving of memorial donations. That's what our dedication of our organ is today.

But we will fail, this organ project will fail, if we hold it as a way to secure the prestige of our congregation in the community, because then it becomes something for ourselves. We will also fail if we hold this beautiful pipe organ as a way to preserve a past, and to keep things the way they were back in the days when we started every service singing "Holy, Holy, Holy." I understand By [Reesor, who had commented earlier that he appreciated singing this hymn today]; I, too, love that song and from time to time for a few weeks we do open our service with it because that's part of our roots, part of our heritage. But God has plans for this organ that open us to an unknown future. What is the music, what is the whole musical life of the future of our church, everything from pipe organs to a djembe [African drum]? Who knows? We entrust that to God because dedication is not about keeping things preserved the way they have always been. Dedication is entrusting our lives to God's hands.

Imagine those people in Haggai's time. I don't think they were greedy and lazy. I think there was something really frightening about the idea of rebuilding the temple. I think what arose in their hearts was the question of how they could rebuild this temple because it would never have the glory and splendour of the days of Solomon. It would be but an act of sorrow to try to rebuild that glorious beloved temple that stood for hundreds of years. And so Haggai told them they didn't have to fill it with its splendour. They just had to build it and God would fill it with splendour. Now that's a profound message, not just about building temples, but about everything we do with our lives. Everything to which we dedicate our lives has that feeling of inadequacy, and we're not sure the objects of our dedication are really going to work. That feeling applies even to these pledges; we put money in to keep this church going, but there are so many things that make the church's future look shaky and uncertain. How can we be sure that this is enough to secure the future of our church? Well, we can't. What we can do is to give what we have, and then trust God to fill it with splendour.

Today we also honour the memory of those who dedicated their lives to our freedom, who gave their lives in the world wars and the Korean War. As I was thinking about that, I also read a piece by our Moderator this week on our United Church national web site. In it he refers to an interview in which he was asked what the United Church has to offer people. He went along and tried to struggle with that question, and there were some interesting insights. But it got me thinking that none of those answers are enough to explain what the church is. We have a temptation in our modern world, with all the emphasis on behavioural psychology, to try to build our church on the basis of what people need, and to ask how we fulfill those needs. We're tempted to answer the question of what the church offers by saying we fulfill all of these needs. But ultimately, while all that is important, the answer still falls short. As a matter of fact, I think it doesn't even touch the heart of what the church is really about.

When our country called upon those people during the wars to go and fight, they weren't talking about what their country had to offer them, they weren't talking about all the benefits of signing up and going to war, they weren't appealing to the self-interest of people who wanted to further their own lives. They were appealing to the exact opposite

sentiment in the human soul which is that we want to give ourselves to something bigger than who we are. We have something to give, something to dedicate, something to devote. And I feel the same way about the church. Although the church fulfills many of the people's needs, it is far more importantly an opportunity or a channel for people to give something, to offer themselves, rather than being something to receive. It is an opportunity for us to dedicate our lives--whether it's what we have materially, our talents, what we have in our souls, or indeed our very lives. It is an opportunity, which every human being needs, to devote, to dedicate, to give his or her life to something beyond him- or herself.

That's what it meant for those young people to enlist. That's how their lives were fulfilled. And that's what we need to reclaim as a church. The pledges we dedicate are not primarily about getting our needs fulfilled. Rather, they are primarily about the emptiness of our lives when we spend every dollar we have on ourselves. They are about how much richer our lives become when we have an opportunity to give some of what we have away to something beyond ourselves. That's the true enrichment of life, the dedication of life, which brings life to its true fullness and fulfillment.

And so we celebrate that today in the dedication of the organ, the dedication of our pledges, and in our remembrance of the dedication of the ones who gave their lives for our freedom. We celebrate the dedication of life where we give all that we have, and trust God to fill it with splendour.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor