

39th General Council Sermon: Living History, Making Home

Sermon preached by the Right Rev. Dr. Peter Short on Sunday, August 13, 2006, at the opening worship of the 39th General Council. Revised from speaking notes.

Sisters and brothers of the 39th General Council, we're making history. We're not just having a meeting here, we are living and making history. Who knows, maybe some day, some sunny day, you'll be sitting there on the porch winded from a game of chess, trying to get the rocking chair started, and you'll be telling stories to some youngster and you'll be saying, "You know, I was there at that 39th General Council—Thunder Bay back in ought six." And their eyes will get wide and they'll whistle softly and they'll say, "I'm so not into history."

Well, actually, I am interested in history because for one thing I'm so old I've been around for three quarters of the history of The United Church of Canada. But it's not just that I've been hanging around for so much history. There's something about love in it, too. Both my grandmothers were Methodists and though they've long gone, I love them still. Death may end a life but it doesn't end a relationship. When the United Church was formed they were in their 20s and I like to imagine them that age today. They are with me here now, you know, Dorothy and Lillian, the musician and the dreamer. I am grateful for my grandmothers. I am grateful for the whole great cast of characters whose living and whose faith have formed The United Church of Canada. They have bequeathed to us the heart and the hope we have.

I am grateful for the eight Moderators who are here, and the three who could not be present. They include

- the only Moderator ever to have ridden a horse into General Council
- the only Moderator who started out as a nurse and came into the church led by a baby
- the only Moderator whose first language is Cree and who led a team to listen to the heartache and the dreams of a province whose first language is French
- the only Moderator ever to have been appointed to the Senate of Canada and thus to achieve a title longer than she is tall
- the only Moderator ever to throw out the first pitch at an American League baseball game and to give us the exceptional gift and opportunity of making national news out of Christology
- the only Moderator who grew up as a refugee in Siberia, whose courage and humour held us through some of our hardest days
- the Moderator from Newfoundland whose patience, fortitude, and willingness to weather the storms helped bring us through the most difficult changes the General Council Office has ever experienced
- the Moderator who walked out of the Council hall and down a long hill to a teepee where he entered and spoke to the Elders the words of an apology the likes of which had never before been heard from the church and changed the way we think about ourselves, about God, about this country, and about one another
- the youngest Moderator ever elected, the one who changed the face and the soul of the office, who was elected in Saskatoon 34 years ago and who is therefore the dean of the Moderators even though he looks like he could outrun us all

- the Moderator who presided with such exceptional courage and grace while the Council made its passage toward Victoria through those momentous days in 1988 and who held the space while the church took the first steps in a passage that would change our life
- and the only Moderator who, in that momentous year 1988, could have written the lines: “Stay with us through the night, stay with us through the dread, stay with us blessed stranger, till the morning breaks new bread.”

I am grateful for the presence of all who have served this office before me: preparing a way, leaving a strong legacy and a light to go by, each one bringing something precious, something no one else had brought before.

We're living history, we're making history, and one day, dearly beloved in Christ, we'll all *be* history. But today we live. The church may be many generations old but it's only one generation deep. Today we are the living ones whose hearts and hands make the gospel of this United Church live. Look around you at the faces that are living and making history. There's nobody here but us chickens. It is stunning to think that the Creator in her wisdom chose to match the likes of us with this frightening and pregnant hour in the world and in the church. If there are any fans of the Grateful Dead, any deadheads out here, you may be remembering Jerry Garcia saying, “With the world the way it is, somebody's got to do something. It's just such a damn shame it has to be us.”

But we are not alone. There is not a person here who does not owe more than can be named or even imagined to those on whose shoulders we stand.

I am a minister in a United Church congregation in Fredericton, New Brunswick. The congregation to which I am called began life as the Fredericton Methodist Church. It was formed by 11 people in 1791, the year that John Wesley died.

I love Methodist history. I love how Methodists have from the very beginning been all mixed up in literacy and tavern music and micro-credit and the gin trade and in the things of life both painful and beautiful that are the medium of the gospel; just as bread is a medium of the gospel and coins and pearls and swine and houses built—some on rock and some not—and sons lost and found.

I love the story of the Methodist Chapel, the one they called the Great Lighthouse. It was a little church in Seneca Falls, New York, in the middle of the 19th century. They called it the Great Lighthouse because lives were redeemed there to the sound of the wonderful music at the gospel services. And they called it the Great Lighthouse because that little church was a station in the underground railroad that helped slaves make their exodus toward freedom.

One day that Methodist Chapel opened its doors to a meeting of people who wanted to do something about women's rights—especially the right to vote. They drew up what they called a Declaration of Sentiments. In the chair that day was a local woman named Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It was a meeting that would spark a movement, a movement that would change the world.

But as the years went by the little chapel was closed and it was converted into an opera house. Eventually the opera house became a meeting hall. As more years passed the meeting hall became a car showroom. The car showroom gave way to a laundromat. One day the laundromat went out of business and the dilapidated old building was abandoned and left boarded up and empty. By the middle of the 20th century, none of the townsfolk even knew that there had once stood a Great Lighthouse where the old laundromat used to be.

Then in the 1970s, some women came to Seneca Falls because they knew it to be the home town of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Through their research, it was discovered that hidden in the shabby interior of that abandoned building were the original roof trusses and window frames of that Methodist Chapel. Today that building has been restored and stands at the centre of a small national park dedicated to the recovering of women's history.

It's not only buildings that start out as a Great Lighthouse and end up abandoned, boarded up, and shabby inside. People do, too, people whose souls need to hear the music, hear it sung for them until they can sing for themselves the redemption songs.

I love Methodist history but like all human history I am appalled by some of it, too. One of my grandmothers was the daughter of a Methodist preacher in the little villages north of Kingston in the Bay of Quinte Conference. Let me tell you the story of her brother.

My grandmother had an older brother named Charlie. Charlie was coming home from school one day when some boys gave him some cider to drink. It turned out to be the wrong kind of cider for a son of the Methodist manse to be drinking. When he got home, Charlie's father, the Methodist minister, sent him to bed without supper. In the night Charlie called out for some water and my grandmother, hearing him, went with a glass of water for her brother. She was caught in this act and given a beating by her father, the minister.

That night Charlie disappeared. He never came back. Ever.

Why did he go and never come back? We don't know. It's like suicide—you never know exactly why, but you do know exactly how deeply it hurts.

My grandmother, when she was old enough to decide for herself, left the Methodist Church. She practised a spiritual discipline all her life, though, and so I suppose in a way she left the church but the gospel didn't leave her. Lot of people like that around, don't you think? People who have left the church but whom the gospel has not left.

I know the gospel never left my grandmother. Yes, she had witnessed cruelty and loss and shame and regret on behalf of what the church was said to stand for. But still she found a way in her life to pass on grace and delight and love and respect and healing and laughter and compassion. She used to tell me when I was very small that she always knew when I was coming to visit her because when I was on my way to her house a bird would come into her garden and sing my name: "Peter. Peter. Peter." Imagine—a child of such significance in the wide realm of creation that even the birds of the air know his name and announce his coming.

It reminds me of the old Hasidic tale from the ghetto. On Friday at the end of the working day, a poor and exhausted old man could be seen making his way through the streets toward the candles and the Shabbat table that awaited him even in his poverty. What might not be seen was the angel who went before the poor old creature shouting, "Make way for the image of God! Make way for the image of God!"

Over the years I began to believe that it wasn't just my name that was sung in the garden, it was Charlie's name, too, the brother who never came back. Over the years I came to believe that somewhere he is walking down a street oblivious to the figure shouting his coming: "Make way!"

Now I'm in the church. I am a minister like my great grandfather before me. I've been here in the church a long time and I suppose I've dragged grandma back here too, because she

was never afraid to go anywhere I was. Here's something I know as one who has struggled so long and failed so often to learn the grace that is at the heart of our gospel.

Charlie is coming home.

He's been gone a long time and lived in a far country and his skin may be a different colour now and he may speak a different language now, but I see that he is coming home.

Charlie is bitter sometimes, but there's something in him that has never left, something calls him home to where the pain was because maybe beneath the failure, that was where the hope was, too.

He's mad a lot of the time. He's remembering his father, the minister whose righteousness went before him the way a rattle goes before a snake. He's coming to set things right for his sister. Charlie is showing up every day at the church, sometimes at the back door. You may have seen him although you may not have recognized him—he's been gone so long.

Sometimes he comes wearing a suit and fondling the Blackberry in his pocket. Sometimes he comes with hardware in his eyebrow and pants with no knees. Occasionally he seems intrigued by the church but mostly he seems indifferent.

Whether or not it is clear to you, he's looking for grace. Don't give him ideology. He's looking for bread. Don't give him a stone. He's looking for life. Don't give him morality. He's come looking for home; wondering if it's any place he'd even want to be anymore. Don't give him an institution. He's not sure if you'll be glad to see him. Don't greet him by asking him where he thinks he's been all these years.

Tell him there's a bird that sings his name. Tell him his sister has become a brave angel of grace. Tell him his father longs for his forgiveness. Tell him he's not made for the church, the church is made for him.

Say to him, "Welcome, welcome home." Say to him it's good that he's here.

When hurt and anger and loss and regret come home, especially after all these years, let these words of the prophet Isaiah be heard in the house of worship and in the circle of Christ:

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. *Isaiah 11:9*

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain....

They will not hurt or destroy.

My sisters and brothers, when we are in the midst of living a hard and inexplicable history, it is never a good thing to get angry on behalf of God.

When we are living in the midst of impossible expectations and constant demands, it is always a good thing to be liberated from the need to manage the world.

When we are living history, may we always at the same time be making home.