

Spirituality Series: Sermon #2 – Roots & Home
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, February 10, 2019

Genesis 1, Matthew 1, Ruth 1

Welcome to Sermon #2 in a series of 3 on Spirituality, based on *Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution*, written by Diana Butler Bass in 2015. Diana is the author of 10 books, a few are: *A People's History of Christianity*, *Christianity after Religion*, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. Some are in our church library. In 2018, she published her latest book, *Gratitude*. Diana has held speaking engagements throughout North America, speaking about church trends and culture shift, and working with many denominations, both in Canada and the United States. She holds a PhD in Religious Studies and is an avid statistician, analyzing trends from religious and demographic data.

Grounded represents a complete departure in her writing style. If anything it is her spiritual memoir. A card carrying Episcopalian for most of her life, Diana became disengaged from traditional church and found herself without firm church roots. She became increasingly aware of how God was present all around her, in her relationships, where she lived, and in the world about her. This book is about finding new spiritual ground by discovering and embracing God in the world around us – in the soil, the water, the sky, in our homes and neighbourhoods, and in the global commons.

Last week we looked at the spirituality in the world about us, in dirt, water and sky. We talked about the culture shift to a more experiential connection to God, and a hunger to locate God next to us, breaking away from traditional depiction of God up on high. Diana characterized this traditional church as the 'elevator church', where God dwells on high, all knowing, all powerful, but at the same time distant.

You and I are a part of the delicate balance of ecosystems that govern this natural world. We are intertwined with all of creation, and with it the air, water, and earth, and we are intertwined with each other.

In reading *Grounded*, it is very apparent how much of the story dwells on Bass discovering her own family roots. Her parents died when she was young and she knew very little about her ancestry until this moment came into her life: "I had returned home from a business trip exhausted. Tired of airplanes and hotels, I blurted out to my husband, "I wish somebody would just ground me." As soon as the words came from my lips, I felt an overwhelming need for connection, an urgent desire to know where my family had come from and what their lives were like. My own parents had died and had left only snippets of family stories. I felt as if I had inherited a few puzzle pieces, with no larger picture to guide me in putting them together."¹

And then things began to make sense for her as she learned more about her roots. It explained now how she could feel strangely at home in a Quaker church she had never been in

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution*, (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 136.

before – her Quaker heritage being a part of her soul. She was beginning to understand ‘her people’.

Exploring your ancestral roots can be a wonderful hobby, but for it can borderline on addiction! Bass states, “Global Industry Analysts (GIA) estimates that 84 million people spend anywhere from \$1,000 to \$18,000 a year on genealogical research, including pricey DNA tests to find a physical connection to their past.”²

But it is more than just finding out that we might look someone from a past generation. Bass states, “Just as God is found in the immediate experience of the world around us, God is also with human beings through history. Finding God-with-us is a spiritual practice of memory, connection through time with our ancestors – Christians call it the ‘communion of saints’”³

God is into genealogy. The Bible is filled with lists of who begat who. We find the first genealogy in the Bible in Genesis 5. “This is the list of the descendants of Adam ... When Adam lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his likeness, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he became the father of Seth were eight hundred years; and he had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred thirty years; and he died.” The genealogy ends with Noah.

We read the genealogy for Jesus this morning, in the Gospel of Matthew. That long list includes the names of kings, as well as names that we might actually recognize, David, Obed, Jessie, Boaz, down to Joseph, the husband of Mary.

Bass writes, “Genealogy is one of the most significant, perhaps even universal, aspects of the phenomenon called religion. Since the dawn of time, human beings have believed that spiritual insight, power, and piety somehow passes down through generations.”⁴

Our hymns this morning, Faith of our Fathers, and I Love to Tell the Story, witness to the ways in which we as a church look to our spiritual ancestors for story and tradition. Their lives and example connect to the living legacy of faith that connects one generation to the next, in the same way the biblical genealogies bestowed continuity and authority from one to the next.

In the end, genealogy brings us to the realization that we are all related. If you go back enough generations, we all share the same ancestors at some point. Bass writes, “Our roots are intertwined. We are all related to each other. We belong to each other.”⁵ She goes further, “Through the search for our ancestors, we discover that the branches of our family trees are entangled. When we make our way through the thick canopy of the past, we discover that lineage is anything but a line. It looks far more like a web.”⁶

² *Ibid.*, 138.

³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

I must admit that I struggled to appreciate the joy and sense of family that others in our Grounded book study shared. My father did a bit of searching and documenting the Cunningham family, and my grandmother recorded MacDonald generations. And I was trying to understand where God fit into ancestry.com. But there is one way the door opened for me and that was in remembering how important my grandmother and great aunt were to me for they were the only ‘religious’ ones in the family. This communion of saints idea came home to me for I am the link from them to whoever will be the ‘religious’ one in the generation after me. Here is where I see God-with-us in this traceable lineage. But there is too now for me a growing sense of God’s abiding love for all who have lived and died before me, in the Cunningham and MacDonald family lines. God was with them just as much as God is with me now.

Where is home for you? Bass quotes Philip Sheldrake, a scholar of Christian spirituality: “Place is location with particular significance because of its connection with the people who live there rather than somewhere else, or because it evokes something of significance.” It involves history, memory, practices, story, and ritual ... Home is a place where we belong.”⁷

Bass offers the optimal definition of what a home can be, “Home is a vulnerable place, the location of the most tender practices of human relationships, where kindness is essential for the safety and growth of all those within a household ... You are willing to open up, without resistance or shyness, and face the world. You are willing to share your heart with others.”⁸

But home can also be a difficult place, a place where the heart has never found home, through carelessness and neglect, or worse a place of domestic violence and sexual abuse. A place where trust is violated.

Tonight I work at the Inn from the Cold in Newmarket, a shelter for the homeless. Is it in anyway a home for them? Margaret always has the bed in the right corner of the women’s room. Does that give her a sense of home? How do the homeless find home? Two weeks ago, I helped to fill Margaret’s hot water bottle – only 1/3 full please she reminds me. When she tucks that in for her feet, under the blankets, and her head rests on the pillow, does she feel safe for this night?

The Book of Ruth offers a reminder of where home can be found. Ruth is widowed and instead of staying in her own homeland after her husband’s death, she pleads with her mother-in-law Naomi to be allowed to accompany her to Israel to find a new home: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die – I will die – there will I be buried. (1:16-17)”

Invariably people will tell me, “Home is where the heart is”. Diana quotes David Marine as he writes about the word, ‘home’, “The English word ‘Home’ is from the Old English word ‘ham’ (not the pig), which actually refers to a village or estate where many ‘souls’ are gathered. It implies there’s a physical dwelling involved, but the main idea is that it’s a gathering of people. One dictionary I came across online had an interpretation of the modern definition of home that I really like. It states that home is “the abiding place of the affections.” To me, that

⁷ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 178-79.

sums it up like nothing else. It's not a building or a room, but a place where your love dwells. Home is the abiding place of the affections."⁹

I have a better sense now of what home is. Growing up, my parents gave me a sense of home, where Sunday night dinners happened without fail, where I felt safe and protected and free to be me. Since then, I have experienced different kinds of homes – including one that splintered with divorce. In my wisdom, I now understand that home is truly where the heart is. I wonder sometimes what my children might define as 'home' as they each live with partners in apartments and houses. Maybe I will ask them one day.

Where you live is ultimately a sacred question. It is where you go home to lay your head at night. We dwell at home. And God dwells there with us.¹⁰

Bass writes, "Throughout all of human history, we have built houses for the divine – temples and shrines and tabernacles and churches and sanctuaries – all to provide God shelter and extend that shelter to pilgrims who pause under holy roofs." "Ultimately physical houses go to ruin, but home is an ongoing spiritual promise."¹¹

In 1719, Isaac Watts penned a hymn based on Psalm 90 that resolutely states that when all is said and done, our spiritual home will always be found in God.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

Spirituality is about opening your heart to discover and embrace God in the world around you, in your roots and in where you find home. You *are* grounded in this world.

Amen

⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 191.