

“We do not lose heart” - The tent-body

“For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. “

Recently, I went tent camping again – having dropped that form of vacationing over a decade ago - it took a re surge of adventurous spirit (and the assurance that my adult daughter would be an experienced companion in this) to pitch a tent again.

The weather was fine, the air mattress comfortable and the neighbours on the campground eventually stopped talking and playing their guitar around midnight. In the morning I awoke to the sound of camp wood crackling in the fire place and birdsong above my head. It was lovely.

Tent maker Saul of Tarsus (turned apostle Paul) offers this metaphor. And because of my recent camping experience I've come to appreciate that image again. Which home though does he speak of when he says *“the tent that is our earthy home”* ?

Despite the language that evokes “home” and “buildings” what Paul speaks of when he says “our earthly home” is not the homes and houses- and not the earth as our planet.

The physical home I live in, a sturdy farmhouse from the early 19th century, is anything but tent like.

Those who built it placed the wood frame on a basement made of massive squared granite stones.

The house is standing straight and tall 170 years later. Because of its solidity it invites solid furniture.

Sturdy, well built 19th century tables and sofas have found their earthly home there. Together with countless books the combined weight of our living there is...lets just say – substantial.

While “de-cluttering” and “letting go” and even preventive “death cleaning” are all the rage, our family so far defies the trend by sticking with some of

the stuff that speaks of roots, of memory, of manual skill, and of awareness of time before this very moment in history.

The tent, our earthly home – this is Paul's name for the body. The body of a child or a teen, a senior or person in midlife. The body in all its shapes and forms and expressions of diversity.

Yesterday we had the first pride parade in town. It was old fashioned, kind, ..small...happy.

Some of our neighbours, persons from a young adult to senior age spoke their truth and the town listened. That was a spirit filled moment. Their truth about their bodies and selves that deviates from “the norm”, yet is a God given body like any other.

How many have experienced bullying or injustice or violence! How many have experienced being ignored or made fun of or worse. The community shows love when we listen with respect to someones entire story including to the painful and difficult and horrific parts; even the parts that might make one feel uncomfortable, and respect and honor another body's life story. How many are strong in the midst of their frailty and woundedness! How beautiful to seek unity, while celebrating difference!

The tent- like earthly body- home of our self – is fragile and gets pounded by the stormy weather of life's events.

Do you see your bodies tent like qualities? The transparency to the elements...how quickly you overheat, are cold or get damaged...the quick bruising of skin...

Worse than that, Paul and his friends live with bodies which are “groaning” and being “hard pressed”; show signs of dead tissue in the body and of “wasting away”...theirs is a truly fragile body that is exposed to all the elements of illness and nastiness that can pour down onto our poor tent-body.

Whatever it is that is happening to him while he languishes in Rome, being in such a body is a severe test.

Yet, his words speak of confidence and good spirit:

We do not lose heart. “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet

inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. “

Whatever he experiences in pain in his body, he describes them as “light and momentary troubles”.

Remember when in camping trips past...you woke up on rain soaked tent floor, the air mattress deflated, the last sweater wet, shoes squeaky with rain, and the matches too wet to start a fire....

“Light and momentary troubles” - to be borne with grace and a good portion of humour -when you know that in a couple of days time you can drive back to your sturdy home, have a warm shower and change into dry clothes.

But what is it that Paul looks forward to? What is it that gives him so much confidence that troubles are not the end? He expects a resurrection life beyond death; a life in harmony with Jesus, the Christ.

In this life apostle shared Jesus' wounds and humble body, after death he firmly believes that there is a next life in which he will also share Christ's risen life.

What do we make of this today?

We are today generally not at all so focused on life after this life as previous generations have been. . Could everyone's fondness for bucket lists indicate how little people expect of a life after life?

And many of us today could not comfort someone in difficulty or physical pain with the hope that while in this life he or she may find their body a source of discomfort or pain, to remind them that in the next life everything will be whole and healed with God.

Yes, much has changed since Paul's days; especially for us Christians in the west.

What is our reason the for not losing heart when present circumstances are bad?

Take our communal body, the church...much reason to lose heart....

in fact as of yesterday our United Church, long having been in something like palliative care, are gathering at the 43rd General Council to finalize the biggest change in the church organization since union in 1925. Necessary because entire generations are missing from the churches across the country now. For those of us who remain, why do we not lose heart?

Would we say its because the church will be built as a new building not made with human structures, in heaven after it has died here?

There is more: More while we are living: We do not lose heart because in the midst of death symptoms we are surrounded by life, given from God's spirit. Somehow, what Paul speaks of in future terms, also has a reality in the present.

We do not lose heart, because, as the body of the church shows plenty of dying signs, it also experiences moments of joy, and energy, and freedom. The more we are forced to bid farewell to our church structures “made by human hands” the more we may also enjoy experiences of church as in “a building from God, not made by human hands”, such as when small groups sit together to study, or work or pray, or when a large group such as the GC celebrate their faith in a tent city in workshops and art and music.

The more the body needs to let go of the way we used to do things, because it can't any more, the more the body can be open for new experiences, new celebrations, joys and relationships.

Might this be true for the communal body, the church and for our individual bodies as well?

These days we visit our long time family friend in hospital whenever one of us can spend a day in Halifax....mysterious brain condition leaves her unable to speak or coordinate movement properly or play her instruments....yet her frail physical body hosts a personality which seems unchanged.... a carrier of memory and feelings ...and at her bedside her many friends gather, show love, weave new bonds of love and caring, celebrate life in the face of the symptoms of death. And she laughs with us. And where she can not speak she can sing the words of the old songs she used to sing with our kids when they were little.

And so we do not lose heart.

This tent like body must be folded up some time and be put away. But there is a spirit, a divine life in us that has its home in God, even while the structures fall away.

In the church, as the body of Christ...we too show the marks of death on our church body, dropping income, loss of people and loss of entire generations. But we friends who are church together can show forth the life of Christ – not as a triumphant large and mighty institution- but in the kind loving and free way of those who have not much to lose except their heart- and that we will not lose.

What when your and my tent-body is destroyed? What when the body dies, the tent rips beyond repair?

Opinions are divided of course: For some, its back to the earth, molecule to molecule, dust to dust...for others its the hope of a “mansion in the sky”...everything good the way we knew it - only better.

I hope for the “self” to still have a home in God, who knows my story and loves me as I am.. While my tent- body returns to the elements, the “we” or “me” might be “housed” in a space all together different. Not an eternal “mansion”, but within a “ house “ *“not made with hands”* -clearly not something you and I could recognize as a “house

Perhaps that mystery of the energy of love; .

For me its sufficient that Self might enter a space in the realm of Eternal Divine Love after death. That would, in fact be way more than sufficient...outright awesome.

In the meantime, we do not lose heart.

Our tent-body the church body – and the personal body - is part of God's story with this earth- and this story is not finished yet.