

My Lord and My God

Sermon – April 12, 2015 © JD Penner

Scriptures: John 20: 19-31, 1 John 1:1 – 2:2

Obituary references:

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/facts-and-arguments/lives-lived-erika-adelheit-koop-95/article23768524/>

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/robert-schuller-the-man-who-built-the-megachurch/article23782767/>

Apparently, you know you're getting older when you read the obituaries in the newspaper or online, and you recognize the names more often than not. I guess that means I'm getting older, since on Good Friday, I was reading through the Sports section of the Globe and Mail and came to the back page where there were two obituaries for people whose names I recognized. (On a side note, I find it amusing that the publishers of the Globe and Mail decide to put obituaries in the Sports section where they have stories about Toronto's sports teams, esp. the Maple Leafs.)

In any case, for completely different reasons, I recognized the names of the deceased this past Good Friday. One was Robert Schuller, born on a farm in Iowa in 1926, and who had died the previous day at the age of 88 in California. The other obituary was for Erika Adelheit Koop, born in Rosenthal/Chortitza in 1919, the same colony where my dad was born and where both of my parents' families have their roots, as do some of you. Erika Koop died in Winnipeg in October last year. While I didn't know Erika personally, her story is very similar to that of my father and grandparents, so she feels familiar. The life stories of Erika Koop and Robert Schuller are of course very different, and I couldn't help but notice the contrast between them.

Many of you who may have watched Sunday morning television, when you should have been here at TUMC, will recognize Robert Schuller, the televangelist and his "Hour of Power"

program that started in the 70's. The program became one of the most watched Sunday shows in the world, and at one point was the fourth longest running television program in the United States. At its height in the 1990's, "Hour of Power" had 20 Million viewers around the world, being broadcast from the remarkable Crystal Cathedral in Garden Gove, CA. The Crystal Cathedral featured more than 10,000 panes of glass, seating for 3000 congregants and 1000 singers and musicians. Outside, it had another stadium-sized screen for drive-in worshippers. Yes, you heard correctly. Drive-in worshippers. When Robert Schuller began his ministry in California, he rented a drive-in theatre for \$10 on Sunday mornings. His ad in the local paper said "Worship as you are, in the family car". Robert Schuller was a trained pastor in the Dutch Reformed tradition, having attended two of its institutions - Hope College and Western Theological Seminary, both in Michigan. During his ministry, a visit from Norman Vincent Peale, author of the best-selling book "The Power of Positive Thinking" gave the church wider recognition and set Mr. Schuller on a new course in his ministry. He was an upbeat preacher and wasn't afraid of theatrics. He used phrases such as "turn your scars into stars" and "it takes guts to leave the ruts". As it continued to grow, his ministry spent more money on "performers" and increasingly larger and more lavish buildings that served as the worship space and TV set. Robert Schuller retired in 2006, leaving the church with debts of \$40 Million USD. The ministry declared bankruptcy in 2010, due to the heavy debt-load created by lavish spending, changing demographics and viewing habits and poor succession planning. The Crystal Cathedral was sold to investors and later to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange County.

If you ever watched "Hour of Power" during its prime, you would have seen that the pulpit and altar are greatly elevated. Both in the drive-in days of the ministry and later in the Crystal Cathedral, due to the elevation and distance from the folks sitting in a football field-length room inside, there is no way Robert Schuller could even see all the faces of the people to whom he was preaching. This was not a community building ministry – people could come in their cars, or sit next to each other in the pews, or watch on television, be inspired, or should I say, entertained, by the activities at the front and then go their own ways afterward. What connection would these people ever make with each other? I mean, really, how would sharing time work? "Oh yes, the blue Chevy Malibu is flashing its lights, could one of the ushers please bring the driver a microphone?" Would people attending those services, or

watching on television, really be changed by this ministry, or work in common for change in the world, if they didn't even know each other? Or would their conscience be assuaged if they just gave money to it. Given that the ministry was almost exclusively focussed on the Sunday morning programming, with little concern for a sustainable community of faith or for acting in the service of others, it doesn't come as a surprise that this ministry was bankrupt in 2010. Certainly, many people's lives may have been changed by what they heard and saw, but was the ministry itself building a sustainable faith community that would outlast the leadership of the day? Imagine what 20 Million people worldwide having the Spirit of Christ within them could have done if they had actually worked together for peace and justice issues.

Contrast this with the story of Erika Koop, found on the same page, which mirrors the stories found in the depictions around the room today. I should point out that these stories are just one of the strands of many stories of hardship and faith. There are those in our community who have experienced similar stories either in their own lives, or through their own ancestry. Erika was born to Anna Zacharias and Johannes Epp in 1919, two years after the Russian revolution. Her mother died when she was 2. Her father remarried to a woman that treated Erika harshly, although Erika is said to have grown up feeling empathy for her mother and her difficult life. In 1923 the family moved to Rosthern, SK, sponsored by her Zacharias grandparents. Three year old Erika crossed the world wearing a pair of small wooden shoes carved by her father. The farm on which she lived in Rosthern fell on hard times during the Dirty Thirties, and when crops failed in 1935, they were forced to move to Winnipeg. At age 16, Erika marvelled at the green urban forest of a big city, and said "I felt I had arrived in the Garden of Eden". (By the way, I think there probably more than a few Winnipeg Mennonites who would say the same thing today.) However, life was not easy for Erika. As the eldest she bore the heavy share of family chores, and at the same time, worked as a domestic and a factory seamstress to help her family survive. Erika was active in the church, and met John Koop in a Winnipeg church youth group; they went on to marry and have six children. She also sewed and cooked for others, and was a strong supporter for the Winnipeg Mennonite Childrens' Choir for which she would paint backdrops and sew costumes.

Twelve grandchildren would become the highlight of her life after her husband's passing. When she herself was facing death in hospital, with 20 family members gathered around her, she told each one she loved them and then exclaimed to them 'Don't just sit there all quiet –

sing to me.” The last line of the obituary reads “She maintained her sense of humour during her final hours, surrounded by love and the sounds of her favourite hymns, all sung in four-part harmony.”

What is notable in the contrast of these two stories is what’s missing. In the newspaper article on Robert Schuller that focussed primarily on his ministry, and quite overtly talked about his approach to faith, I longed to see some discussion of the impact the ministry had on people, how they came to faith and acted on that faith, or what inspired Robert Schuller to do what he did. What was changed in the world or people’s lives because of that ministry? Almost opposite to that, in Erika’s story, you read about the struggles of the family, and what Erika did to serve others. Her Mennonite faith is not directly mentioned, although implied. Why couldn’t the writer have named her church affiliation and faith more directly – clearly it motivated her. It was what ground Erika. Now, I did learn from other sources that she was active at Elmwood MB church in Winnipeg, and taught the first cooking classes at MBCI (Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute). Clearly, her Mennonite faith in an unseen God was the central focus of her life, and is what sustained her and her family as they travelled from hardship in Ukraine to later hardship during the Dirty Thirties in Rosthern and Winnipeg. Her belief in an unseen God gave her strength and commitment to serve throughout her life.

So what is the motivation for people to love and serve in the name of Christ? This brings me to the passage read earlier from the Gospel of John. Here we find the disciples in fear of their lives, and likely wondering what they were going to do now that their leader was dead. The authorities might continue to look for the followers of this dead man, seize them and kill them, to prevent any resurgence. At this point, despite a locked door, the risen Christ comes and stands among them and reveals himself to them. Jesus says to them twice “Peace be with you”. Maybe they needed it twice, since I can imagine how freaked out they might have been and probably causing quite a ruckus. We know how excited people can get when they see someone they haven’t seen for a long time, so I can just imagine how excited the disciples were when their leader whom they thought was dead showed up! Maybe the second time he said “Peace be with you”, it was more like “Be quiet”, and the Gospel writer was just being eloquent. In any case, when Jesus says it a second time, he adds:

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

First Jesus says he’s sending the disciples. This motley group, who are afraid of the world around them – the Jews and the Romans - are to go out into the world, sent by Christ himself. A world who has its doubters and haters. It’s not unreasonable for the disciples to expect they might be persecuted should they be recognized. So why would they go?

So Jesus “breathes on them” – a gift of the Spirit. Notice how this parallels the story in Genesis, chapter 2 vs. 7, when God “formed the man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a human being.” The Gospel writer draws the parallel intentionally. What animated natural life in the beginning now animates the spiritual life of these disciples, pointing to a re-created humanity. Not only is Jesus sending the disciples into the world, but Jesus has provided them with what it takes to face that world. You have the Spirit. Be confident in what you have seen and learned (all of it). Use it. We, the church, the people of faith, now have a mission! And this comes from a guy who, while acting in love, healed others, taught people how to live, and was killed and came back to new life, and is now standing in front of us! Do you need a more inspirational model? Jesus had just showed the disciples the marks in his hands and side, so the evidence was right in front of them. No matter what life throws at us, we have what it takes in our core to take it on. We are sent to live in the world, even in one that might hate us. That’s clearly what Erika believed, that’s what the women in the 18 paintings around you believed. And they faced considerable hardships in their journeys to safe harbours, but their core spiritual faith sustained them, because what motivated them was a deep Spiritual belief in the Divine power of the Risen Christ.

The story doesn’t end there, though. There is Thomas, sometimes called Doubting Thomas, which I think is unfair, since he doesn’t stay that way – he goes from doubting to believing. How? Thomas wants to see the evidence, and really, given the death of Jesus he knows that occurred, why wouldn’t he want the proof? “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in his side, I will not believe.” There are times in our own lives that we need something tangible, something to tell us that God is real, that Jesus example is a good

one, that we can do it, that our faith is strong enough and not in vain. So Jesus appears to Thomas, and again says "Peace be with you". Again, if Thomas didn't faint, I'm sure he was pretty shocked. Jesus tells him to "put your finger here and see my hands...reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe". Thomas – look at what I've experienced; you know what happened; I am living proof of the power of God. Everything I've been telling you is real and true. And Thomas responds "My Lord and my God!" That's it – the only words Thomas says in this Gospel, "My Lord and my God!" Now, I love my annotated version of the NRSV – it's filled with information that helps provide context for what's written, and draws some basic parallels and interpretations. This is really handy when you're in Bible College. However, for this verse, "My Lord and my God", the editor simply states "Climax of the book." No interpretation, no connection to other verses, just "climax of the book." The whole book of John achieves its climax in this five word phrase. This is Thomas' "aha" moment. All that he has seen and heard while following Jesus suddenly comes crashing with brute, real force into Thomas' head and heart at that moment. If Thomas had any doubt that all that he had seen, heard and felt was somehow an illusion or illogical, it was erased at that moment. This is the moment of truth for Thomas in his life when he recognizes what others had already realized. That Jesus truly is Lord. Jesus's teachings were real and of God. The example Christ sets for us is real. If you weren't sure before, you can be now, Thomas. And so can we.

This is echoed in the 1 John passage. What strikes me about this passage is that writer is clearly speaking from a point of deep conviction. In fact, when I first read this passage knowing the paintings would be hanging here at TUMC, it was as if these women, our real and spiritual ancestors, were speaking this passage aloud to us themselves. Take a look at again at the first verses as printed in the bulletin of 1 John 1, the first paragraph. "We declare to you what was from the beginning..." I invite you to take a quiet moment and read just the first four verses as if the women in these paintings are speaking it to you...

The writers of both book of 1 John and Gospel of John are testifying to the reader, to us, the reality of Christ. What follows after verse 5 is the instruction for what naturally should happen when that belief is real. You can't claim a Christian life and not live it. "If we say we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true, but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light we have fellowship with one another."

This is not to say that our lives will be perfect. Things will happen either to us or because of us that will have negative effects. There will be sin. But there is also forgiveness. The Gospel reading and this passage in John 1 promise that forgiveness is possible. We will have fellowship with each other, despite our sin, since forgiveness is there. We can live in harmony. We are called to live in the light of Christ.

Someone close to me once said, "Where you shine a light, that's where things will grow." It's kind of nice to celebrate Easter at the beginning of spring, since it's now, after we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, that things start to grow. We and the natural world around us are animated with the Spirit of New Life. Now is the time we can grow into the Christian disciples we are called to be, and live in the world with Christ as our example. Let Easter become the starting point for new life. Millions of people have suffered persecution and fled horrible situations or experienced major trauma that shakes them to their core, all the while trying to live as Christ lived, knowing this Easter story. They faced death with confidence. The Spirit of God had animated their lives. Faith wasn't used as a basis for entertainment just on Sundays. Faith was what drove them to survive, to live and to serve others, to be in fellowship with their communities. Don't be afraid of death – it's going to come eventually, just as it did for Jesus, but believe in your core all of what you have seen and heard, and you will know that the example of Christ is worth following. If you live with that faith, and you live as an example of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, you can be positive that others will see it too. They will see the marks of a true Christian. Let the Spirit of Christ animate you. Sing in four-part harmony about the Glory of God. For those that believe, their response will be that of Thomas - "My Lord and my God!" It's the same thing the 35,000 Mennonites who tried to flee the persecution in Ukraine, like my father, my two Omas, my great-grandmother have said. It's the same thing Erika Koop said. It's the same thing the women in the paintings here, have said. It's the same thing that the many thousands of other Christians, who have fled persecution, have said. You are invited to share that same conviction, walk in the light the same way and share that faith with others. You, along with Thomas, our ancestors and millions of others, are invited to join the chorus in the conviction of the risen Christ and say "My Lord and My God!"

