

TUMC Retreat Weekend Alternate Service
at the St. Clair – O'Connor Community
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Dreams of a Far Off Country

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Text: 2 Corinthians 5:6-17

We gather today as an alternative to the annual church gathering at Silver Lake – a place of many memories amongst us. Wonderful as such experiences have been though, some of our bodies rebel at the thought of sleeping on hard beds – and so choose not to go.

Mind you, if that were our only opportunity for travel to a desirable place beyond Toronto, some of us might be there. The reality is most of us have the privilege and means to explore far off countries around the world. Erna and I, along with another couple from TUMC, have just returned from a trip to Alaska and the Yukon – with the fantastic experiences of being on a boat bellying up to the face of a huge glacier as it cracks and calves its ice into the sea in front of us, of flying around the icefields of the highest peak in North America, of driving in a van over the high mountain pass of the top of the world highway built on frozen tundra between Tok Alaska and Dawson City Yukon. These were wonders to behold – something I scarcely could have imagined as a child. It seems the Alaska travel bug has infected a number of others of us at TUMC this year, all with a similar dream to see the glaciers and mountains from the sea. And others are seeing other countries and places.

How privileged we are to be able to indulge such desires. We live at a time when travel is much easier and readily available than in generations past. We can make the time – particularly after retirement from our life's careers. And many of us have the financial wherewithall thanks to pension plans and savings.

As I say that, I feel mildly guilty. Somewhere at the back of my mind is the idea that desiring our own good and hoping for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing. But is that really Biblical? I think not. I'm with C.S. Lewis¹ who once said such a notion crept in from philosophies of Kant and the Stoics and is no part of Christian faith. It's true that the New Testament has quite a lot to say about self-denial. Yet, if one looks more carefully, self-denial isn't an end in itself. The end is to take up our crosses so that we may follow Jesus.

¹ In C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, a sermon preached in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, 8 June 1942, and subsequently published in several places.

That said, a friend of mine likes to say we shouldn't under estimate the value of guilt as a motivator. He has a point. If we are falling short on taking up our crosses and following Jesus, then guilt may well be a useful check on our motives to travel.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't have desires and enjoy them. The question is whether we desire enough. To continue with C.S. Lewis, he also observed that: "Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased", he said.

His point was that, wonderful as indulging our travel desires are, they pale in comparison to a secret, unspoken dream most all of us have for another far off country – that of continued life beyond this earthly life, of the everlasting life promised in the Gospels, or of the 'new creation' Paul writes of to the people of Corinth in verse 17 of today's reading. It's something at the periphery of our thought – almost a silent, maybe secret wish – something we don't know if we dare believe because it's never actually been experienced in our life.

And like Lewis, in raising this whole topic I feel a certain reluctance – almost as if I'm committing an indecency. It's not much talked about in sermons these days. A few generations ago, sermons often put an emphasis on "being saved so you can have eternal life." The heavy handed way the message was presented – the appeal to trite sayings, the use of guilt to coerce people's behaviour – turned many of us off.

So our sermons began to to emphasize more how we should follow the example of Jesus in living our lives to feed the hungry, and help the poor. And that has been important. Yet, in the process we effectively dismissed the shy inner voice seeking our eternal destiny.

And we also gave space to the common social view that, in a way, earth can be made into heaven. Philosophies of progress, whether from philosophers or politicians or social scientists, suggest that it's possible for happiness to come to each person on earth – or if not happiness, then at least a reasonable measure of health and shelter and sustenance. As a social scientist I support that aspiration, though I know it flies in the face of Jesus' observation that 'the poor you always have with you'.

But, as a person of faith, I'm also aware that even if happiness for all were feasible, still each generation would lose it by death, including the last generation of all, and the whole story would be nothing, not even a story, for ever and ever. Whatever humankind can do, we remain conscious of a desire for our distant land no natural happiness will satisfy.

How, then, do we understand this desire, this dream, if we haven't experienced it? In the first half of our lives, when we're busy with establishing our identities and

careers and families, the idea may well seem interesting, but it remains abstract and theoretical. We assume it's something that can be thought of further down the road since we don't expect to die any time soon (though we know it could happen).

By the time we reach the second half of life, particularly as we age, the desire becomes a little more real – though we still hesitate to speak of it. After all, there are people who argue that life ends – and that's that. But, for most of us, that seems far too simplistic – particularly if we've sat with a loved one as he or she died. One wonders at what happened – not so much about the body – that's easy to understand. The second law of thermodynamics explains that. But, what happened to the mind – the person – the soul? There's nothing in science to explain that. Surely that doesn't just stop. Conversely, at the beginning of life, the birth of a child, we understand the biological part, but where does the person, the soul inhabiting the body of such new life come from? No answers there either in science.

That's when turning to the writings of those closer to God than I/we becomes helpful. Today's passage from the apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is a good example. This letter was written to the Christians in Corinth at a time when they were divided amongst themselves, with a number of leaders being critical of Paul – some questioning what a cripple like him could have to say that was Godly. In the earlier chapters, Paul responds to such scurilous arguments and encourages people not to be divided. And then he invites them to think about their dream of the distant land of the future.

Listen to verses 6 – 10 again:

⁶ Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. ⁷ For we live by faith, not by sight. ⁸ We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that everyone may receive what is due them for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

What Paul says is that while we are "at home in the body" (that is, alive) we are not "at home with the Lord" (that is, with God in heaven). In other words, heaven is our true home. And if heaven's our home, then everything we do is part of our journey towards our home. Our life as a follower of Jesus is not to be just an aimless ramble with heaven tacked on the end like an appendix in a book. That's not to say we can't go on trips to Alaska or Europe; it's to say that wherever we travel, we keep ourselves aimed towards a goal that is pleasing to our God in heaven.

Then in verses 14 – 15 Paul says:

"¹⁴ For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵ And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."

Our aim is for it to be Christ's love that urges us, motivates us – not guilt, not pressure from other sources – it's the sense we are living out Christ's love in everything we do – and in particular as we relate to our neighbour, to our family, to others we meet.

That requires some discipline. And discipline is something most of us in the second half of life know something about. I have memories of my grandparents spending hours reading our scriptures. Then, as they aged, my parents – they always read, but reading the scriptures and writings of others who had thought deeply and prayed about these matters became dearer as they aged. Though I didn't appreciate it at the time, they were models for me – paving the way. Now it's my turn, and yours, to be such a model

May God bless us all as we seek to be faithful models of living out Christ's love as an expression of our dream of our far off country of ultimate destiny.