

“GOD WAS THERE BEFORE NUMBER 1.”

April 30, 2017 – Rev. Rosemary Doran

Recently I read a book that I couldn't put down. It was quite short, a simple, easy read and a fascinating story. It's called “Have a little faith”, written by Mitch Albom. In the book Albom relates the story of his relationship with two pastors, or rather one pastor and one rabbi. The rabbi, Albert Lewis – sometimes known as “The Reb” - led the congregation Temple Beth Sholom in Haddon Heights, New Jersey, for over forty years. Under his leadership the membership grew from fifty to one thousand families. The pastor, Rev Henry Covington, was in Detroit – not upscale Detroit but poor, derelict, downtown and often scary Detroit. Sometimes I used to have to drive through that area alone late at night, praying that I wouldn't run out of gas or have a puncture before I crossed the river safely back into Windsor.

Covington was a reformed ex-con, drug dealer and drug user. His congregation was largely an impoverished African-American community, operating out of a rundown church with a seemingly permanent hole in the roof. People had to sit under tarps to keep the rain and snow off. From this church Covington established and operated the “I am my brother's keeper” ministries.

A couple of things stood out for me about these two men. Ministry for them was about people – not so much about programmes, plans, projects useful though these were – and are – at times. Ministry was about people. Each man knew and loved his congregation. They walked with them, talked with them, ate with them, sometimes even lived with them. They were always ready with a quiet word of encouragement or comfort or even challenge at times. They were never confrontational or judgmental. They were simply there for and with people, accepting them as they were, enabling them to change at their own pace. They loved their people and were greatly loved in return.

Lewis and Covington were both humble men. They achieved many significant things in the course of their ministry but they never sought or took credit. It was never “Look at how great I am” but rather always “Look at how great God is.”

This made me think of the Micah passage (Micah 6: 6-8). Micah, one of the Old Testament prophets, is doing his prophet thing. His job is to call the people of Israel to account for wandering from God's ways, fattening their bank accounts at the expense of the poor and needy and merely going through the motions of being God's people while in reality selling out to the values of the world around. Maybe this is not totally unfamiliar?

What, says Micah to the people, does God really want from you in the way of worship and witness? And he answers that it's not the big, showy stuff, not the meaningless rituals but that they love mercy, show kindness and walk humbly with God. Micah is still saying that today. We should pay attention.

This theme of humility in our relationship with God is reinforced in Albom's book in a conversation with The Reb. It goes like this.

It is summer and we are sitting in [the Rabbi's] office.
I ask him why he thinks he became a rabbi.
He counts on his fingers.
Number 1, I always liked people.
Number 2, I love gentleness.
Number 3, I have patience.

Number 4, I love teaching.
Number 5, I am determined in my faith.
Number 6, it connects me to my past.
Number 7 – and lastly – it allows me to fulfill
the message of our tradition:
to live good, to do good and to be blessed.

At this point I found myself a little surprised – as indeed Albom says he was too. Where's the expected humility? The conversation continues for another minute.

I didn't hear God in there [says Albom].
[The Reb] smiles.
God was there before number one.”

in other words, all our gifts and talents are not of our own making. They come to us from God. Our job is to identify and own our gifts and do something with them. In fact, not to identify, own and use them is to disrespect God who gave them to us in the first place.

But maybe we don't feel as if we have any gifts, certainly not like the ones that Paul lists in Romans (12: 6-8) where he speaks to a favourite theme – the community of believers as the body of Christ. Each member, says Paul, however apparently small or insignificant, is essential to the smooth working of the whole. What good am I? What good can I do, we may say. But - remember the bumper sticker from a few years ago, ungrammatical though it may be? - “God made me and He don't make no junk!”

The Tuesday study group has been looking at the Book of Ruth. It's an enjoyable, low-key, happy-ever-after story, which is a nice change from the wars, battles and general mayhem of some of the earlier Old Testament books. Ruth was a foreigner from the land of Moab, marrying into an Israelite family and Israelite society. One of her claims to fame is that she was an outsider, who became a direct ancestor of Jesus. In The Message, Eugene Peterson's version of the Bible in contemporary English, Peterson's introduction to the Book of Ruth suggests that scripture is a vast tapestry, showing God's creating, saving and blessing of the world. The big names like Abraham or Moses can be intimidating to ordinary people. There is no way we could be like them. But, says Peterson,

The Book of Ruth makes it possible
for each of us to understand ourselves,
however ordinary....as irreplaceable in
the full telling of God's story.

All of us are gifted by God in one way or another. All have a part to play. So maybe we can't do the preaching, teaching and prophesying that Paul refers to but we can all smile, share, welcome, console and encourage. We are simply called to recognise and put to good use in our own particular circumstances the gifts that God has given us in the first place. And God will do great things with those gifts.

Albom gave a eulogy for Covington, as he had done for The Reb. He delivered it to a packed church in the form of a letter. It went like this.

I once asked you, Henry, why you chose
“I am my brother's keeper” as the name of

your ministry and we spoke about the Cain and Abel story. You got me to go back to the Bible. And I noticed something in those words. When God asked Cain where his murdered brother was, before saying the famous line “Am I my brother's keeper?”, Cain first said “I don't know” I don't know where my brother is.

You could have said that, Henry. Once things turned around for you, you could have been like a lot of us, ignored the hunger and desperation of our cold city streets. You could have said “I don't know about that.” Instead you said “I know.” I know what it's like to be out there and I **am** my brother's keeper – so I need to do something.

You gave a better answer than Cain, Henry. And so I hope when you came before God last week and he asked you “Where is your brother?” you answered this way.

You said: “Lord, my brother is eating on plates from the kitchen of our church, my brother is sleeping on a gray mat on the floor of our gymnasium, my brother is warm even on a winter's night with the heat we spent our last pennies providing.

My brother is coming from here and you to patch a hole in your sanctuary and my brother is thanking you right now, Lord, for the gifts you have given us.”

I hope God smiled at that, Henry, and said “Well done.”

Here end the stories of Albert Lewis and Henry Covington but **our** stories continue. May we act justly and do kindness and walk humbly with our God, who don't make no junk and who is always there before number one.