

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
November 6 2022 – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: John 15:9-17

Sermon: Getting it Right (Remembrance Sunday)

For many years we had a veteran in the congregation who **knew his stuff** when it came to Remembrance services. For example, one year I had copied and pasted the Words of Remembrance off of a Canadian Legion chaplains' site. Somewhere along the way they must have switched the words "grow" and "not" around, so in the liturgy which we used this morning that year it read "they shall not grow old..." It sounds fine, right? That is the way you and I would probably say it – if we were not writing poetry, of course. But the original words – much more poetic and true to the vision of the author – reads this way: "They shall **grow** not old, as we that are left grow old." The poem goes on to use that same cadence in the lines that follow: "they mingle not, they sit no more, they have no lot..." Even now, I have to check myself when I read it, because even when I know better, the mistake often slips out before I can catch it.

With online worship and what not, it has been a few years since I have printed out the words of remembrance. I found an old bulletin and typed it out just as I found it. But I kept going back and looking at it, thinking something was not quite right. The voice of that wonderful veteran kept ringing in my ear: if you're going to do it, do it right!

So not content with all my old bulletins going back to 2012, I typed the words into Google and it came up with the story of the British poet, Laurence Binyon, who wrote the original poem which is called "For the Fallen". And there I found the original wording: "They shall **grow not** old, as we that are left grow old..."

I was glad I checked.

Laurence Binyon wrote this poem "For the Fallen" in 1914, September of 1914, so not many weeks after the First World War started. Already just a few weeks into the war, the British forces had suffered terrible casualties in battles with the German army: the battles of Mons, le Cateau and the Marne. Though Binyon himself was too old to enlist, he lost several close friends and a brother in law during the war. He volunteered with the Red Cross as a medical orderly instead. So he knew the pain of war, and processed the grief and shock of those first terrible losses by writing poetry.

If we have a hard time identifying or relating to the agony of war that Binyon was expressing, we only need to think back to the beginning of the conflict this year between Russia and Ukraine, a real image of more recent memory. All those photos you might have seen of youngsters 18 and up volunteering to defend their homeland. Unthinkable in this time, for me to think of my son and his classmates donning uniforms and going off to war.

Binyon's words, found in the fourth stanza of the poem, were later adopted by the Royal British Legion for their services of remembrance, and later Canada and Australia followed suit.

This is his poem "For the Fallen":

*With proud thanksgiving, a mother for her children,
England mourns for her dead across the sea.
Flesh of her flesh they were, spirit of her spirit,
Fallen in the cause of the free.*

*Solemn the drums thrill: Death august and royal
Sings sorrow up into immortal spheres.
There is music in the midst of desolation
And a glory that shines upon our tears.
They went with songs to the battle, they were young,
Straight of limb, true of eye, steady and aglow.
They were staunch to the end against odds uncounted,
They fell with their faces to the foe.*

*They shall **grow** not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.*

*They mingle not with their laughing comrades again;
They sit no more at familiar tables of home;
They have no lot in our labour of the day-time;
They sleep beyond England's foam.*

*But where our desires are and our hopes profound,
Felt as a well-spring that is hidden from sight,
To the innermost heart of their own land they are known
As the stars are known to the Night;*

*As the stars that shall be bright when we are dust,
Moving in marches upon the heavenly plain,
As the stars that are starry in the time of our darkness,
To the end, to the end, they remain.*

I wondered whether there is more to the ordering of "grow" and "not", an ordering that we might take as a message from today. What struck me was that the poet always puts the positive word first: grow/mingle/have/sit... Then the negative follows, in second place, as if cancelling it out: not/no more/never more ...

Isn't that the real cost of war? That it takes something positive, and cancels it out. Binyon might well have been thinking of a neighbour or friend or family member, someone who had their whole life ahead of them, full of potential gifts and talents, like farming or teaching or mechanics or art. That untapped potential quickly became a life that was cancelled out by war.

What does it mean for us that in our usual sentence construction, we are much more comfortable, much more accustomed to putting the negative first. It comes more naturally to begin with a not or a no or a never. We may not be heading off to war, but we do seem to live in a world that puts conflict and division first – and the positives are the leftovers, for cleaning up or reconciling after the damage is done. It's the stuff of poets and optimists and idealists in their ivory towers.

What is the true meaning of Remembrance Day? Some think it might be a glorification of war, which means they either embrace it or reject it. Some think it is a day to remember something from "the past", and don't connect it to the decisions we make today. Some see it as a time to fight or stand up for their particular understanding of what "freedom" should look like in a democracy.

We are not here to glorify war nor the supremacy of any nation. We are not here to try to justify the violence of warfare or the budget of our armed forces.

We **are** here to remember all the positives that were lost. All the people, of whatever country, who have died willingly or unwillingly because our political leaders felt that war was the only way to emerge out of conflict. We are here to count the cost of their lives against the ultimate goal the war was meant to achieve. We are also here to pray for all who suffer now and who have suffered as a result of conflict or war. We take it on trust that the cost of war is too much to forget or to take lightly.

And that is why it is important to get the words of remembrance right. Because someone dragged those words up out of their broken heart, and out of a time shock and horror, that such a thing as war was happening to their neighbours, their mates, their families.

Our remembrance is not simply something in the past, but something that we make present here and now as we realise the significance the past has for each of us. Today we acknowledge the power of love laying down its life for others' safety. We recognise that there is no greater thing that one can do, than to offer one's life, one's work, one's resources, one's words for the benefit of others.

Jesus words, taken today from the gospel of John, were written to be his last commandments to those who followed him. And Jesus always put the positive up front, it was the guiding principle of their faith in action.

"love one another, as I have loved you." - "you are my friends"
"I have made known to you everything that I heard."

“I chose you, I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” - “love one another.”

What would it mean for us to put the positive first, when we are facing conflict or trouble. Not to erase the negatives or gloss over a real problem. But to let the positive value shine for a moment, before the negatives that threaten to cancel them out take over. To let the positive go first, so that we will know the real cost of losing them. To prioritize what is good and loving, and let the negatives speak just in time to protect the vision of the abundant love with which God has blessed us.

The words of Jesus, the words of a poet, the words of remembrance we have shared today.

To the end, to the end, they remain. Thanks be to God.